

**THE YEARS OF RED DUST :  
ASPECTS OF THE EFFECTS OF THE  
GREAT DEPRESSION ON NATAL,  
1929 - 1933.**

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## ABSTRACT

### THE YEARS OF RED DUST : ASPECTS OF THE EFFECTS OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION ON NATAL, 1929 - 1933

*by*

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The Great Depression has received relatively little attention from South African historians and economists. Most studies of the period concentrate almost exclusively on political aspects, and ignore the economic realities. Little attempt has been made to quantify and analyse the effects of the depression and drought, nor has a proper integration of these economic realities and their impact on politics been attempted. There is perhaps good reason for this. There is such a wealth of material to be digested that the task has been perceived as too daunting for a single researcher. Local or thematic studies have therefore been undertaken. This thesis is essentially a local history study which examines the effects of the Great Depression on the then province of Natal.

The depression affected all areas of economic activity in the region; industry, coal-mining, and both commercial and subsistence agriculture. Hardly any aspect of life was untouched. It scarred the collective consciousness of an entire generation. Under the twin onslaughts of the depression and drought, the people of Natal turned to the state for assistance. The state turned out to be a poor provider, preferring to devote its efforts to alleviating distress among white farmers, while forcing the major burden of relief onto the urban local authorities. Such authorities were obviously reluctant to assist anyone other than their own burgesses.

Prevailing racist sentiments ensured that the major economic burden was passed onto those who could least afford to bear it, the African majority. Government policy held that Africans were expendable components of the urban work-force; when the economy shrank they were simply expected to return to their places of origin. During these years the idea that the reserves could accommodate all the "surplus" African workers was finally exploded.

Isolated from the centres of power, and under intense pressure from the depression and drought, white Natalians reacted with characteristic jingoism and agitated for the secession of the province from the Union. Black politics, which had reached boiling point prior to the depression, fell into a slump, also occasioned by the prevailing economic woes. Militancy turned into co-operation.

## PREFACE

This thesis was partially inspired by my late parents, Bill and Vera, both of whom lived through the Great Depression and were scarred by the experience. From childhood, thrift and the careful management of resources were constant themes in our home. I deeply regret the fact that neither of them is alive today to read this work, but I owe them an inestimable debt of gratitude for their help and support through the years of my academic career.

A similar deep debt of gratitude is owed to my supervisor, Professor Philip Warhurst. A gentleman and scholar, he has made the lonely process of doctoral research far more pleasant and fruitful than it otherwise could have been. He has been the perfect guide and mentor; unfailingly cheerful and positive, yet perceptive enough to know when a gentle nudge was required. Even in the last few months before his well-deserved retirement, Philip Warhurst has worked tirelessly to carefully untangle the infinitives I am so fond of splitting.

Literally thousands of hours of research were undertaken in the course of this thesis, many of them in libraries and archives, and I would be remiss indeed if I did not extend a sincere note of thanks to all who assisted me, especially in the Killie Campbell Africana Library, the E G Malherbe Library, the Don Africana Library, the Edminson Library and the Natal Archives Depot. The assistance of the staff of the Durban Chamber of Commerce and the Natal Agricultural Union is also gratefully acknowledged.

The kind assistance and encouragement of many other academics must also be acknowledged. Professor Ruth Edgecombe lent me much valuable material on the coal mines of Natal and read the first draft of that chapter, making valuable comment on it. Jeffrey Horton, Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Natal, has also been an unfailing source of encouragement and an unstinting critic of my tardiness. The assistance and support of my many colleagues at Edgewood College of Education, both those in the History Department and others, also deserve more than a cursory mention. Their support and encouragement, often on a daily basis, have meant a great deal to me.




Mrs Norma Hatcher has overseen the final preparation and printing of this thesis. Her professionalism is much appreciated.

The largest share of my gratitude, however, must go to my wife, Dr Jenny Edley. Well aware of the trials and tribulations of post-graduate study, she has listened with infinite patience to the boring minutiae of this study. She has also edited and proof-read this thesis and shaped its often incomprehensible prose into something resembling English. I think anyone will agree that one doctorate in a marriage is trying, but then to repeat the process...

Finally, grateful thanks must also go to my family and friends who have supported me in this endeavour. Special mention must here be made of my late brother Bob and his widow, Jean, who took me into their home and supported me in the early days of my academic career. Without their generosity and selflessness, I would never have been able to begin my quest.

## DECLARATION

In accordance with the regulations of the University of Natal, I certify that the contents of this thesis are my own original work, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text. I further certify that this thesis has not been presented to any other University.



David Edley

December 1994

## CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
Abstract	i
Preface	iii
Declaration	v
List of Tables	vii
List of Abbreviations	xii
Chapter One:       Introduction	1
Chapter Two:       The Great Depression	14
Chapter Three:     The Industries of Natal During the Great Depression	44
Chapter Four:      The Coal-Mines of Natal During the Depression	81
Chapter Five:      Agriculture in the Doldrums	117
Chapter Six:        The Reserve Economy Under Stress	167
Chapter Seven:     Unemployment in Natal	206
Chapter Eight:     Attempts to Relieve Distress and Unemployment in Natal	251
Chapter Nine:      The Depression and White Politics in Natal	304
Chapter Ten:       The Socio-Economic Context of Black Politics in Natal During the Depression Years	345
Chapter Eleven:    Conclusion	389
Bibliography	400

## LIST OF TABLES

	PAGE
<b>Table 2.1</b>	
Net contributions of various mining industries to the national income, 1928/29 to 1933/34	27
<b>Table 2.2</b>	
Annual value of imports and exports, 1928 to 1933	28
<b>Table 2.3</b>	
Gross Domestic Product of the Union, 1928 to 1934	29
<b>Table 2.4</b>	
Index of employment in the Union, 1928 to 1935	31
<b>Table 2.5</b>	
Population in the urban Areas of the Union, 1921 to 1936	35
<b>Table 3.1</b>	
Value of building plans passed in Durban, 1928/29 to 1933/34	56
<b>Table 4.1</b>	
Coal exports from Natal, 1912 to 1928	84
<b>Table 4.2</b>	
Sales of bunker coal from Natal mines, 1912 to 1928	87

<b>Table 4.3</b>	
Number of oil-burning vessels calling at Durban, 1926 to 1935	109
<b>Table 4.4</b>	
Total dividends paid by Natal coal-mines, 1927 to 1934	109
<b>Table 4.5</b>	
Labour force on Natal coal-mines, 1929 to 1933	110
<b>Table 5.1</b>	
Sugar cane production in Natal and Zululand, 1928 to 1934	123
<b>Table 5.2</b>	
Sugar production, exports and export prices, 1928 to 1934	123
<b>Table 5.3</b>	
Production of cane by white growers, 1932/1933	131
<b>Table 5.4</b>	
Output of Indian and African cane growers, 1928/29 to 1933/34	132
<b>Table 5.5</b>	
Land Bank credit : purposes of loans granted, 1928 to 1934	133
<b>Table 5.6</b>	
Comparison of cane tonnages produced : planters and millers-cum-planters, 1926/27 to 1933/34	134

<b>Table 5.7</b>	
Wattle exports, 1928 to 1934	139
<b>Table 5.8</b>	
Maize yields, Natal and the Union, 1927 to 1934	142
<b>Table 5.9</b>	
Maize produced by Africans on white farms, 1927 to 1934	144
<b>Table 5.10</b>	
Exports of butter and cheese from the Union, 1928 to 1934	160
<b>Table 5.11</b>	
Average export prices for butter and cheese, 1928 to 1934	161
<b>Table 6.1</b>	
Maize production in African reserves in Natal, 1926 to 1935	176
<b>Table 6.2</b>	
Producers' price of maize, 1926 to 1935	181
<b>Table 6.3</b>	
Production of millet in reserves of Natal and Zululand, 1926 to 1934	184
<b>Table 6.4</b>	
Production of sugar-cane by Africans, 1926/27 to 1933/34	186

<b>Table 6.5</b>	
Cattle holdings in the reserves of Natal, 1926/27 to 1935/36	195
<b>Table 6.6</b>	
African holdings of woolled and non-woolled sheep in the reserves of Natal and Zululand, 1926 to 1935	199
<b>Table 6.7</b>	
Production of wool by Africans in Natal, 1925 to 1934	200
<b>Table 6.8</b>	
African holdings of goats other than angora in the reserves of Natal and Zululand, 1926 to 1935	201
<b>Table 7.1</b>	
Percentage distribution of unemployed by vocational character, 1930 to 1933	211
<b>Table 7.2</b>	
Unemployment among white juveniles in select towns and cities as at 31 December 1931	219
<b>Table 7.3</b>	
Number of registered African male employees in Durban, 1928 to 1933	226
<b>Table 7.4</b>	
Number of six-day permits issued in Durban, 1927/28 to 1932/33	229

<b>Table 8.1</b>	
Amounts expended by the Natal Provincial Administration on relief works, 1930/31 to 1934/35	255
<b>Table 8.2</b>	
Union government and Department of Labour budgets, 1926/27 to 1934/35	270
<b>Table 8.3</b>	
Amounts allocated and expended by the Department of Labour, 1926/27 to 1934/35	271
<b>Table 8.4</b>	
Expenditure by the Department of Labour on unemployment relief, 1926/27 to 1934/35	272
<b>Table 8.5</b>	
Costs of relief works in Durban, 1929/30 to 1933/34	279
<b>Table 8.6</b>	
Annual budget of Durban Town Council showing amount spent on relief works, 1929/30 to 1933/34	279



## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ANC	African National Congress
AUWA	Active Unemployed Workers' Association
CNC	Chief Native Commissioner
CTUUC	Combined Trades Union Unemployment Committee
DBS	Durban Benevolent Society
MNA	Minister of Native Affairs
NAB	Native Advisory Board
NAD	Native Affairs Department
NAU	Natal Agricultural Union
NC	Native Commissioner
NCOS	Natal Coal Owners' Society
NDL	Natal Devolution League
NGR	Natal Government Railways
NIC	Natal Indian Congress
NP	National Party
NPA	Natal Provincial Administration
NRC	Native Recruiting Corporation
PBS	Pietermaritzburg Benevolent Society
PUF	Peoples' Unarmed Force
SAP	South African Party
SAR	South African Railways
SASJ	South African Sugar Journal
SNA	Secretary of Native Affairs
VNRCIC	Vryheid (Natal) Railway, Coal and Iron Company

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The economic catastrophe known as the Great Depression has received relatively little attention from researchers of the South African past. Despite the profound and lasting impression it left on the collective consciousness of those who lived through it, on reading the existing history of the Union of South Africa covering the period 1929-1933, one might easily get the impression that the phenomenon bypassed the Union almost entirely, or that it merely coincided with a period of political change at the national level. Such perceptions distort the past; they tell an incomplete and often incomprehensible story and militate against a sound understanding of the forces which both underlay and facilitated political change. Nor do they begin to provide an adequate understanding of the profound changes that were wrought on society during "the years of red dust".<sup>1</sup>

The Union of South Africa did not suffer the same degree of economic, social or political upheaval which many other developed or developing capitalist countries experienced<sup>2</sup> in these years of *Sturm und Drang*. Its position as the world's major gold producing nation, at a time when gold still formed the base of the world monetary system, did afford the country a measure of protection.<sup>3</sup> However, as the Union was part of the international capitalist economy, some adverse effects were unavoidable; the great slump in world trade and the drastic decline in demand for major export products (apart from gold) did have a significant effect on the economy of the Union. This, in turn, raised social dislocation, distress, unemployment and political frustration to levels never before experienced in the Union's history. To exacerbate matters, the depression years coincided with one of the worst droughts ever experienced; outbreaks of malaria, various livestock

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1. I am indebted to Jeff Guy for this African phrase descriptive of the early 1930s. It apparently refers to the dust storms caused by drought.
  2. See A J H Latham, *The Depression and the Developing World, 1914-1939*, Croom Helm, London, 1981.
  3. See L Katzen, *Gold and the South African Economy: The Influence of the Gold Mining Industry on Business Cycles and Economic Growth in South Africa, 1886-1961*, A P Balkema, Cape Town, 1964.

diseases, and invasions of locusts all conspired to bring misery and distress. Thousands of people were forced by these circumstances to leave the rural areas and seek new lives in the urban areas. The patterns of demographic settlement in the Union were markedly altered during these years.

Despite the significant impact of the depression, until recently little attention has been devoted to the period by South African historians. Research into the history of twentieth-century South Africa has been focused mainly on political developments, without giving due weight to the economic and social dimension. Many studies of the coalition between, and later fusion of, the two dominant white political parties exist, for example, but relatively few, if any, examine the economic factors leading up to these events. This lacuna was symptomatic of much of South African historiography, until the advent of the radical and revisionist schools. Yet even historians from these more modern schools, while they do address the major socio-economic themes of the twentieth century, have largely confined themselves to the reinterpretation of past views of government policies of segregation and apartheid. They have found their major themes in the development of the mining industry, and other major capitalist ventures, and their relationship to the state; little attention has been devoted to the study of particular periods, especially the early 1930s.

There is good reason, however, why a holistic study of the Great Depression in South Africa has not yet been accomplished; the phenomenon is so complex and the task so formidable that to attempt an adequate and rigorous analysis of the entire phenomenon over the length and breadth of the entire Union has been seen to be an almost Herculean task for a single researcher.<sup>4</sup> Economists, too, have been somewhat daunted; there are few studies of the economic consequences of the depression in South Africa. Those that do exist are dated and, while they are still of considerable value, they generally deal with macro-issues, which might be of only passing interest to the local historian.<sup>5</sup> Even the economic histories of the Union of

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4. See remarks made by Minnaar in the preface to his thesis. A de V Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture and the Great Depression (1929-1934)", D.Litt. and Phil. thesis, University of South Africa, 1988, p. v.

5. See C W G Schumann, *World Depression, South Africa and the Gold Standard*, Juta & Co., Cape Town, 1932? and his subsequent volume *Structural Changes and Business Cycles in South Africa, 1806-1936*, P S King & Son, London, 1938 and A P Ravenscroft, "The Course of the Depression in South Africa", M.Comm. thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1940;

South Africa do not do full justice either to the depression or to its impact on Natal.<sup>6</sup> The result is that studies are not only few in number, but tend to be thematic (examining only certain aspects of the depression or its effects),<sup>7</sup> or conducted at the level of local history.<sup>8</sup> This study has followed the latter approach; it is essentially a local history of the phenomenon, concentrating on the province of Natal. It now seems generally accepted that only through putting together the pieces at a local level will the countrywide picture of the depression eventually emerge.

Even at the local level, "depression studies" are still in the pioneering stage; much remains to be done. In Natal itself, only three studies have been specifically devoted to the depression. The first, a paper presented by John Sellers,<sup>9</sup> was to prove part of the inspiration for this study. The second was my previous thesis which examined the effects of the depression on greater Durban;<sup>10</sup> while the third, by Charmaine Singh,<sup>11</sup> examined the social and economic effects of the depression on Indians in

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J J Stadler, "Die Bruto Binnelands Produk van Suid-Afrika", D.Comm. thesis, Pretoria, 1962 and M H de Kock, *The Economic Development of South Africa*, P S King, London, 1936.

6. See C W de Kiewiet, *A History of South Africa: Social and Economic*, Oxford University Press, 1941; F Coleman, *Economic History of South Africa* HAUM, Pretoria, 1983; D H Houghton, *The South African Economy*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1964, Reprinted 1975; J Nattrass, *The South African Economy, its Growth and Change*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1981; A L Müller (red.), *Die ekonomiese ontwikkeling van Suid-Afrika*, Academica, Pretoria, 1979.
7. This was Minnaar's experience. After having researched the history of Graaff-Reinet during the depression years, he was emboldened to begin researching the effects of the depression on the entire country but he was forced to restrict himself to a particular theme (white agriculture) because he discovered that the entire depression "...was too wide a topic". Other works following a thematic approach include R A Lewis, "A Study of some aspects of the Poor White Problem in South Africa", M A thesis, Rhodes University, 1974; D R Owen, "White Unemployment and Poor Relief in Pietermaritzburg from 1919 to 1934 with special reference to the Depression Period", B A(Hons.) Long Essay, University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), 1982.
8. A de V Minnaar, "Graaff-Reinet in the Depression Years", M A thesis, Rhodes University, 1978; D W M Edley, "Population, Poverty and Politics: A Study of Some Aspects of the Depression in Greater Durban, 1929-1933", M A thesis, University of Natal (Durban), 1983.
9. J M Sellers, "Natal and the Great Depression." Paper presented at the Workshop on Natal History, University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), 1980.
10. Edley, "Population".
11. C Singh, "The Effects of the Great Depression on the Economic and Social Conditions of the Indian Community in Natal, 1929-1948", M A thesis, University of Durban-Westville, 1990.

Natal. More studies will surely follow.

Any study of a particular period in the history of Natal and Zululand must be located in the context of the wider historiography of this region. A significant development in this regard has been the growth of the "Natal School" of historians over the last twenty or so years. This school has, through intensive research in various fields, largely succeeded in dispelling the once widely accepted attitude that developments in Natal and Zululand had little relevance in the wider South African context. It has clearly demonstrated the inaccuracy of the view that this region had little to offer the researcher beyond whites "...who merely had a walk-on part in broader studies of South African politics as a bedraggled and often ludicrous minority...",<sup>12</sup> and "Zulu" whose only significance lay in their part in the Mfecane or their sullen belligerence in the Anglo-Zulu War. Natal was the birthplace of and testing ground for a host of policies of considerable significance to the rest of South Africa; the "Durban System" of urban African control, and "Shepstonism", the basis of the reserve system, to name but two.

Over the past twenty or more years, considerable time and effort has been expended by historians either in researching, or in directing research into, all aspects of the colourful history of the province. These efforts have borne considerable fruit; there is today a steadily accumulating literature on all aspects of life in the region.<sup>13</sup> Nor is all the research concentrated in the nineteenth century; historians such as Swanson, Duminy, Maylam and Marks, and their protégés, have gradually been uncovering the history of twentieth-century Natal. Interestingly enough, the 1920s and 1930s have received considerable attention from the "Natal School". Research was, however, initially strongly biased towards political activity.<sup>14</sup> More recently,

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12. G Martin, "Identity and Interaction: A Defence of Natal History", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2, May 1994.
  13. See A Duminy and B Guest, "Natal Historical Writing During the Last Two Decades: A Conspectus", in *The Debate on Zulu Origins*, Department of Historical Studies, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1992.
  14. B C Vickers, "Natal and the Provincial Councils, 1929-1932", M A thesis, University of Natal (Durban), 1970; M Walker, "The Provincial Councils and Natal, 1924-1932", M A thesis, University of Natal (Durban), 1976; F G Millington, "Years of Decision for Natal", B A (Hons.) dissertation, University of Natal (Durban), 1973; A H Duminy, "The Death of the Natal Federal Movement, 1932-1934", Paper given at Workshop on Natal History, University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), 1980.

greater effort has been devoted to "history from below" and studies have focused on the experiences of ordinary Natalians, especially Africans. Studies by Maylam on strategies of urban African control,<sup>15</sup> Hemson on the dockworkers,<sup>16</sup> La Hausse on the "Durban System",<sup>17</sup> Nuttall on the period 1929-1949,<sup>18</sup> Edwards on Cato Manor<sup>19</sup> and Kelly on trade-unionism<sup>20</sup> are examples of this.

Cope has added an important dimension to these studies by illuminating the role of the Zulu royal family, and especially Solomon kaDinuzulu, in the political and social life of the region during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>21</sup> Shula Marks in her studies of Solomon, Dube and Champion has clearly demonstrated the duality and ambiguities in the roles of the African political leaders of this time;<sup>22</sup> yet much remains to be done. Definitive biographies remain to be written; studies of the lives of major political figures, both black and white, similar to those undertaken by La Hausse on Petros Lamula and Lymon Maling,<sup>23</sup> and by Marable on Dube,<sup>24</sup> of the lives of

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15. P R Maylam, "Strategies of Control and Evasion: African Urban History in South Africa, c. 1900 - 1950", Paper presented to the 8th Biennial Meeting of the South African Historical Society, Durban, 1981.
  16. D Hemson, "Class Consciousness and Migrant Workers: Dockworkers of Durban", Ph.D. thesis, University of Warwick, 1979.
  17. P la Hausse, "The Struggle for the City: Alcohol, the Ematsheni and Popular Culture in Durban, 1902-1936", M A thesis, University of Cape Town, 1984; P la Hausse, "Ethnicity and History in the Careers of two Zulu Nationalists: Petros Lamula (c.1881-1948) and Lymon Maling (1889-c.1936)", Ph.D. thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1992.
  18. T A Nuttall, "Class, Race and Nation: African Politics in Durban, 1929-1949", D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1991.
  19. I L Edwards, "Mkhumbane Our Home: A History of African Shantytown Society in Cato Manor Farm, 1946-1960", Ph.D. thesis, University of Natal (Durban), 1989.
  20. J Kelly, "Durban's Industrialisation and the Life and Labour of Black Workers, 1920-1950", M A thesis, University of Natal (Durban), 1989.
  21. N L G Cope, "The Zulu Royal family under the South African Government, 1910-1933: Solomon kaDinuzulu, Inkatha and Zulu Nationalism", Ph.D. thesis, University of Natal (Durban), 1985; and the published version of this thesis, N Cope, *To Bind the Nation: Solomon kaDinuzulu and Zulu Nationalism, 1913-1933*, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1993.
  22. S Marks, *The Ambiguities of Dependence in South Africa: Class, Nationalism and the State in Twentieth-Century Natal*, Ravan, Johannesburg, 1986.
  23. La Hausse, "Ethnicity".
  24. M Marable, "African Nationalist: The Life of John Langalibalele Dube", Ph.D. thesis, University of Maryland, 1976.

other major political leaders, would shed more light on the personalities of the period.

But the greatest vacuum that remains in the history of Natal in the twentieth century is that created by the absence of any comprehensive economic history. Even the recent publication of a volume of essays edited by Guest and Sellers,<sup>25</sup> on the economic history of the region, although addressing this imbalance, does not go far enough towards the writing of an integrated economic history. This is not to decry the considerable amount of research that has been focused on aspects of the economic history of this province in the twentieth century; studies such as R H Smith's monumental work on the labour resources of Natal,<sup>26</sup> and Guest's and Edgecombe's research on, amongst other areas, the coal-mines of Natal,<sup>27</sup> are all invaluable sources of information and guidance to any scholar working in this field. Particularly valuable, although now a little dated, is the series of *Natal Regional Survey* volumes, which covered many areas of economic interest including, amongst others, the Port of Durban, the reserves and agriculture.

Just as serious a shortcoming is the lack of integration between the political and the economic history of the region; most studies, particularly of this period, are fairly rigidly compartmentalised. Judging by them, it would seem that the one aspect never impinged on the other; that the economic and the political animals were of different species. This study seeks, to some extent, to redress this balance — it sets out to show how the economic situation in Natal in the years 1929 to 1933 impacted on the political behaviour of people. While stopping short of claiming that all political activity was determined by the economic situation, it attempts to show that the economic dimension to political behaviour cannot simply be dismissed with a passing reference to the effects of the depression and drought. Full account has had to be taken of the scope and impact of the depression and the drought on all aspects

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25. B Guest and J Sellers (eds), *Receded Tides of Empire: Aspects of the the Social and Economic History of Natal and Zululand since 1910*, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1994.
  26. R H Smith, "The Labour Resources of Natal", M.Comm. thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1945.
  27. See Chapter Four.

of economic life in the province. This has necessitated considerable research into areas of economic activity that initially appeared quite discrete; once that had been completed it was possible to draw out certain threads of commonality that ran through the entire period and had a definite impact on political activity. Some of the conclusions reached are tentative; the lack of evidence, particularly concerning some political movements, make this unavoidable.

In researching this topic, use has been made of a variety of sources. As so little has been written on the depression locally, guidance has been sought in the experience of researchers in other countries, notably Great Britain and the United States of America, where such studies are considerably more advanced. A wealth of material exists concerning the events of the depression in the former and extensive use was made of such material in the preparatory stages of this research.<sup>28</sup> Extensive use has also been made of American resources in discussing the origins of the slump; the foremost experts in this field are undoubtedly American.<sup>29</sup> As far as the depression in the Union of South Africa is concerned, so little has been written that much of the research was of necessity of a primary nature. Not that primary evidence abounds, for the parsimony of the Hertzog government, during some of the depression years, meant that statistical evidence, today considered of value to historians, was then not considered important enough to expend valuable state resources in collecting.<sup>30</sup>

Fortunately, enough material does exist to provide a basis for understanding and analysis.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps most valuable of all state documentation consulted was the

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28. See for example, R Cutforth, *Later Than we Thought: A Portrait of the Thirties*, David and Charles, Devon, 1976; J Hayes and P Nutman, *Understanding the Unemployed*, Tavistock, London, 1981; M Muggeridge, *The Thirties : 1930-1940 in Great Britain*, Collins, London, 1940; G Rees, *The Great Slump: Capitalism in Crisis, 1929-1933*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1971; J Stevenson and C Cook, *The Slump: Society and Politics During the Depression*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1977; J Symons, *The Thirties: A Dream Revolved*, Faber, London, second revised edition, 1975.

29. See J K Galbraith, *The Great Crash, 1929*, Penguin, London, 1961; C P Kindleberger, *The World Depression, 1929-1939*, Lane, London, 1977; B Mitchell, *Depression Decade*, Harper, New York, reprinted 1969.

30. The collection of statistics, including those pertaining to agriculture and industry, was halted as an economy measure. Even the general population census of 1931 was restricted to the "European" population alone, thus robbing later historians of much valuable information.

31. This does not mean that such material is accessible to researchers. The Natal records of the Department of Labour for this period were still in the process of being sorted and catalogued



evidence presented to the Holloway Commission, otherwise known as the Native Economic Commission or NEC.<sup>32</sup> Thousands of pages of evidence relating to Natal and Zululand and beyond were consulted, and valuable material was extracted from these. For any researcher of this period these records are a *sine qua non*.<sup>33</sup> Equally important, but of a more restricted applicability, are the files of the Chief Native Commissioner (CNC) of Natal, housed in the Natal Archives. Much valuable information regarding the effects of the depression and the devastating drought on the African population of the region was found there.

Searches of parliamentary records and the personal records of white political personalities of the time proved disappointing; little of value was found. The only possible exception to this was the collection of Heaton Nicholls papers housed at Killie Campbell Africana Library. Nicholls appears to have been possessed of a sense of History (or perhaps felt the need to justify his often controversial political positions), for he documented much of the local white political scene in Natal during the depression years. This collection has long served as the source of much of our knowledge about the Natal Devolution League. The papers of this movement, if indeed any survived, have yet to be located. Like many of the other transitory movements, their activities are known only through the medium of other sources, especially the press.

The press has proved to be a valuable source but, as fact and opinion were often confused in these highly partisan times, newspapers had to be treated with caution. To some extent, however, they serve as mirrors of the times; reflecting the views and opinions then held by their editors (and to a lesser extent, their readers) and as such, have been valuable. Extensive use has been made of the *Natal Mercury*, *Natal Witness*, *Indian Opinion* and *Ilanga lase Natal*. Other newspapers have also been consulted, but have not proved as valuable as these four.

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and were thus not available for use.

32. The Commission reported in 1932. Union of South Africa, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Social and Economic Conditions of Natives in South Africa*, U.G. 22 of 1932.
33. Marian Lacey has demonstrated the usefulness of these records for any researcher working in the field of African life and labour. See M Lacey, *Working for Boroko*, Ravan, Johannesburg, 1981.

On a local level, records of the various town and city councils and their magistracies have been extensively utilised, and much valuable information has been gleaned from them. A vast amount of correspondence of this type was consulted but, as much of it is concerned with minutiae, it is possible to become entirely enmeshed in the local affairs of a single town. These records will doubtless prove valuable to any future researchers working on the depression in particular urban areas, but when writing what is essentially an overview, overindulgence in this direction is a luxury which cannot be afforded.

In writing the chapter concerned with industry in Natal, extensive use had to be made of Smith<sup>34</sup> and of Katzen.<sup>35</sup> Although the latter only deals with greater Durban, both made intelligible the rather incomprehensible census and other statistical data and were valuable guides to other source material which was then consulted. Similarly, the chapter on the coal-mines owes much to the minutes of the Natal Coal Owners' Society (NCOS), which as Edgecombe and Guest have shown,<sup>36</sup> are vital sources for this important industry.<sup>37</sup> The writing of the chapter on white agriculture was more difficult, mainly due to its diversity in Natal and to the lack of any holistic secondary source other than Hurwitz,<sup>38</sup> which although valuable, did not provide the kind of material required for the depression years. Fortunately, Minnaar's work on white agriculture during the depression did provide an overview, although on a national level, and it was possible to use his work for guidance on state policy and pricing structures, for example. Recourse was then taken to both official and unofficial sources on agriculture. Particularly valuable were the various journals which served agriculture in the region: *The South African Sugar Journal* and *The Farmer* in particular, as well as other journals of this type that were less parochial in character. The records of the Natal Agricultural Union

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34. Smith, "Labour Resources".

35. M F Katzen, *Industry in Greater Durban Part 1; its Growth and Structure*, Natal Town and Regional Planning Reports, Vol. 3, Pietermaritzburg, 1961.

36. Both researchers have made extensive use of these minutes in the studies they have made individually and collectively of the mining industry in Natal.

37. I am deeply indebted to Ruth Edgecombe who willingly lent me copies of these, and other valuable sources, pertaining to the coal industry in Natal.

38. N Hurwitz, *Agriculture in Natal*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1957.

and its various affiliated Farmers' Associations<sup>39</sup> were less helpful, but nevertheless gave some insight into the views of organised agriculture in the province.

Details on the economy of the African reserves of Natal and Zululand were extremely difficult to uncover. Fortunately the records of evidence to the NEC are quite extensive and much valuable insight was gained from them. It is necessary, however, to sort fact from opinion, especially in dealing with the evidence given by proponents (and, for that matter, opponents) of the segregationist ideal. The CNC files also shed valuable light on the reserves; it was quite illuminating to see how concerned certain officials were for the welfare of Africans under their administration. Cope's research in Zululand was also a useful pointer. The reserves are an area in which a great deal more research is required; so little is known about the considerable differences between the reserves of Natal and those of Zululand, and between mission reserves and state reserves. In a global study of this nature, limited as it is by space and scope, it was not possible to delve too deeply into these variances, so they must await further research from subsequent historians.

Quantifying unemployment and distress, and uncovering what was done about it, were equally difficult; much of what has been done, especially in terms of quantifying unemployment, is necessarily tentative as official statistics are not yet available. Fortunately, the issue was of such importance that regular bulletins were issued to the press, from which (together with other sources) some idea of the extent of this "social evil" has been obtained.

White politics in Natal has received considerable attention; much has been written about the separatist and other "jingoistic" movements. Thompson<sup>40</sup> has collated much of this work, thereby greatly facilitating an understanding of the nature of white politics during the depression. My earlier study of the Natal Devolution Movement<sup>41</sup> contributed an excellent building-block towards this research. Black

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39. I am grateful for the permission granted by the NAU to consult these records.

40. P S Thompson, *Natalians First: Separatism in South Africa, 1909-1961*, Southern, Johannesburg, 1990.

41. D W M Edley, "The Natal Devolution League, 1931-1933", B A(Hons.) dissertation, University of Natal (Durban), 1981.

politics, apart from the obvious focus on the Beer Hall riots and the activities of the Communist Party, remains an area awaiting considerable investigation.<sup>42</sup> This also applies, even more strongly, to the political activities of Indian Natalians during this period, which have been almost entirely ignored. La Hausse has indicated what can be achieved through a penetrating study of particular historical characters, but many more aspects require examination before a complete understanding of black politics in Natal can hope to be achieved.

This thesis, as a local history study, has both strengths and weaknesses; it seeks, for the first time, to provide a fuller picture of the depression years across the broad geographical area of the then province of Natal, taking account of the diversity of experiences and impact. Yet at the same time, because of its nature it must, of necessity, be something of a general overview.<sup>43</sup> It could not take full account of every area, nor of every debate, nor of every tale. Oral evidence has not been extensively used, not because oral evidence is not valued, but simply because it is felt that a framework of reference has first to be established before the true value of oral evidence can be demonstrated. The collective consciousness is replete with tales of hardship and suffering during "the years of red dust", but many of these would remain unintelligible and inaccessible on their own. More than sixty years after the event, hardly any of the significant characters are still alive; myth and legend have largely replaced first-hand accounts. These too are valuable and deserve to be recorded and analysed once a fuller understanding of the phenomenon is established.

Such a stance may indeed fly in the face of post-modernist views of history as a discipline. However, as many of the more radical post-modernists appear to reject the very bases of current historical endeavour,<sup>44</sup> to the extent that almost nothing

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42. Bradford has shown the way in this with her work on the ICU in the countryside, including Natal, but much more still has to be done. See H Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom: The ICU in Rural South Africa, 1924-1930*, Ravan, Johannesburg, 1988.

43. While some local history purists might take issue with an area as large as the then province of Natal being the subject of "local history", I have followed the lead given by both Kammen and Kew, both of whom argue that researchers might set their own parameters in local history studies. See quotations in C C Eloff, "Aspekte van Plaaslike en Streekgeskiedenis: Teorie en Praktyk", *Contree*, Vol. 35, June 1994, pp. 11 - 12.

44. See K Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, Routledge, London, 1991.

worthwhile can be salvaged, this ideological framework (or the lack of it!) cannot be employed. Until historians and philosophers of history have had time to reflect on the intellectual challenges posed to their discipline by post-modernists, and have formulated adequate responses to it, if indeed such responses can be found, research must continue within paradigms that might very well later be shown to be outdated and of limited value. In a sense this does not constitute a negation of already accepted views of the historian's endeavour, for all accept that there exists no definitive version of the past; everything is constantly under scrutiny and subject to review. This study lays no claim to being an exception.

Even a local history study has to make use of some intellectual framework to mould the formulation of an hypothesis and to provide a *modus operandi* for examining the evidence. Some rather limited theoretical material has been written about local history in South Africa<sup>45</sup> and so guidance has had to be sought from English historians such as Douch,<sup>46</sup> Hoskins<sup>47</sup> and Finberg and Skipp.<sup>48</sup> Such historians have viewed local history as having an important role in building the meso-narratives so detested by the post-modernists. Only through research and rigorous analysis of the local can the general be arrived at with any degree of accuracy. This also appears to be part of the purpose of many of the local history studies produced in South Africa.<sup>49</sup>

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45. Even the excellent collection of local history essays in honour of Winifred Maxwell omits a theoretical chapter. See J A Benyon, C W Cook, T R H Davenport and K S Hunt (eds), *Studies in Local History: Essays in honour of Professor Winifred Maxwell*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1976. Afrikaner historians, by contrast, have been more active in this field. See for example references in Eloff, "Aspekte van Plaaslike en Streekgeskiedenis".
  46. R Douch, *Local History and the Teacher*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, reprint 1972.
  47. W G Hoskins, *Fieldwork in Local History*, Faber and Faber, London, 1967.
  48. H P R Finberg and V H T Skipp, *Local History: Objective and Pursuit*, David and Charles, Newtown Abbot, 1973.
  49. Many of these emanated from the Human Sciences Research Council's Institute for Historical Research in the 1980s. See for example, A Minnaar, *Empangeni: A Historical Review to 1983*, HSRC, Pretoria, 1984; A Minnaar, *Graaff-Reinet, 1786-1986*, HSRC, Pretoria, 1987 and A G Oberholster (ed.), *Paarl Valley, 1687-1987*, HSRC, Pretoria, 1987. The HSRC was also responsible, for much of this time, for the publication of the journal *Contree*, which described itself as a Journal for South African Urban and Regional History. Responsibility for the publication of this journal was later assumed by the Rand Afrikaans Universiteit. Another work worth consulting is C Saunders et al(eds), *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, Vol. 5, 1984.

Attention shall therefore be focused on the sources that help to explain the phenomenon known as the Great Depression in the geographical area of the then province of Natal. Such sources shall be subjected to a rigorous scrutiny and analysis in an attempt to explain both the actual impact on the various sectors of the economy and on the political activities of the people who lived through the "years of red dust". Through this, the hypothesis that the explanation for the political behaviour of Natalians during the depression years lies largely in an understanding of the socio-economic context of the time, will be tested. It is also hoped that a thorough examination will show why the phenomenon known as the "Great Depression" has scarred the collective consciousness of all who lived through it.

Depression studies in this country are still very much in their infancy; in the fullness of time a deeper and fuller understanding of the human experience during those years will be achieved. Once further work is done elsewhere in the country, comparisons will become possible and eventually the complete, integrated history of the depression years will be written. This thesis is a further step towards such an integrated history.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE GREAT DEPRESSION

There are nearly as many theories about the causes of the great economic slump that struck the western capitalist world in 1929 as there are economists, economic historians and historians. It is not the purpose of this study to investigate or document these theories in great detail, but any attempt to deal with the Great Depression, as it has become known, even in a relatively small province of a remote colonial outpost like the Union of South Africa, must take some account of these explanations. Although this economic disaster began in Europe and the United States of America, its effects rippled out and within a relatively short period of time, almost the entire world felt its consequences. What clearly emerges from a study of these causes is how complex and inter-connected they are, but this is hardly surprising given the complexity of the world economy.

Although the collapse of the Wall Street stock market is often regarded as the beginning and prime cause of the Great Depression, there were other factors, many of which pre-dated the Crash. One of the foremost writers on the depression, J K Galbraith, identified one of the early indicators of a financial malaise in the United States in the speculative land sales during the 1920s in the state of Florida, where Americans "... were ... displaying an inordinate desire to get rich quickly with a minimum of physical effort".<sup>1</sup> Galbraith saw disaster presaged in this, for:

the Florida land boom contained all of the elements of the classic speculative bubble. There was the indispensable element of substance. Florida had a better winter climate than New York, Chicago or Minneapolis. Higher incomes and better transportation were making it increasingly accessible to the frost-bound North. The time was indeed coming when the annual flight to the South would be as regular as the migrations of the Canada Goose. On that indispensable element of fact, men and women had proceeded to build a world of speculative make-believe. This was a world inhabited not by people who have to be persuaded to believe but by people who want an excuse to believe.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Galbraith, *Great Crash*, p. 32.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Galbraith argued that the importance of this speculative "bubble" lies not in the considerable amounts of money involved, but in the fact that the faith of the average speculator was not at all shaken by the sudden collapse of the Florida land market. He wrote:

The Florida boom was the first indication of the mood of the twenties and the conviction that God intended the American middle class to be rich. But that this mood survived the Florida collapse is still more remarkable. It was widely understood that things had gone to pieces in Florida. While the number of speculators was almost certainly small compared with the subsequent participation in the stock market, nearly every community contained a man who was known to have taken "quite a beating" in Florida. For a century after the collapse of the South Sea Bubble, Englishmen regarded the most reputable joint stock companies with some suspicion. Even as the Florida boom collapsed, the faith of Americans in quick, effortless enrichment in the stock market was becoming every day more evident.<sup>3</sup>

And indeed it was. The prices and number of shares traded on the stock market, despite a few fluctuations, increased dramatically throughout the 1920s. Taking the Dow-Jones industrial average as a barometer, the index stood at 191 in early 1928; by September 1929, the index had risen to a massive 381, or nearly double in two years.<sup>4</sup> Even more spectacular was the rise in the *The New York Times* index of 25 industrial stocks, which had stood at 110 in early 1924. By January 1929 the index had climbed to 338 and by September of that year to 452.<sup>5</sup> This massive surge was only distantly related to the performance of the American economy which, according to some figures, was already beginning to show the first symptoms of a deep-seated malaise. It was far more directly related to speculation.

That self-same desire to enrich themselves with little or no actual physical effort which had led Americans to speculate in land in Florida, Galbraith and others have argued, led Americans to speculate in shares on the stock market.<sup>6</sup> Shares were not

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

4. Kindleberger, *Depression*, p. 108.

5. R Robertson and G Walton, *History of the American Economy*, Harcourt Brace Janovich, New York, 4th edition, 1979, p. 407.

6. Galbraith was especially harsh in his criticisms of explanations of the stock market crash that regarded it as the result of a lack of governmental control; he explained it rather as another example of the "get rich quickly" mentality of the American middle class. See Galbraith, *Great Crash*, p. 39.



bought with the primary purpose of investing money in dividend-paying enterprises, but with the idea of selling those shares as soon as possible at the greatest possible profit.<sup>7</sup> Such was the demand for shares from the speculating public, that prices were driven ever higher, as the number of buyers often far exceeded the number of shares available. Shares thus acquired an entirely artificial value, a demand value, often totally unrelated to the actual performance of the company concerned. This heated climate also proved ideal for the less than scrupulous, and there were any number of bogus companies whose shares were offered for sale on the market, and whose shares were actually traded long after the confidence tricksters behind them had taken the initial investment and disappeared.<sup>8</sup>

Trading in shares of companies quoted on the stock exchange was not restricted to the rich, for most of the purchases were made "on margin" — credit which the stockbroker advanced to the client against the security of the shares bought — and this facility was open to practically anyone who had enough capital to meet the initial margin demanded by the stockbrokers.<sup>9</sup> Such people were not necessarily tycoons, and included even waiters and taxi drivers.<sup>10</sup> Soon many thousands of people all over the United States (and even abroad) had an interest in the market and watched its fluctuations avidly, each buying and selling shares according to whim or to "information" received. So great was the speculation that the amount loaned by brokers to their clients in such transactions rose dramatically in the late 1920s. From a figure of between \$1 billion and \$1,5 billion in the early years of the decade, it rose to \$2,5 billion in 1926, to \$3,5 billion in 1927, and then by the end of 1928, to a staggering \$6 billion.<sup>11</sup> The indebtedness was offset by loans from banks, as the shares had to be paid for.

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7. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

8. Kindleberger, *Depression*, p. 109. Such financial chicanery was not restricted to the United States. In September 1929, the fraudulent enterprise of Clarence Hatry who had attempted to take control of British iron and steel companies was exposed, causing great consternation and loss of confidence in the City of London. This incident may very well have contributed to the general instability of the financial world. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 14.

9. Galbraith, *Great Crash*, pp. 46-50.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 48 - 49.

Shares were also sold in holding companies which were merely paper corporations, resulting in a "paper chain" structure with as much substance as a house of cards.<sup>12</sup> When, in late September and early October 1929, the market finally began to falter, and the brokers began to call in their margins,<sup>13</sup> the entire house of cards came tumbling down. Speculators, unable to supply the extra cash and eager to save whatever they could, unloaded their shares in a massive selling spree that resulted in the shares of even the most reputable "gilt" companies trading for a fraction of their real value. Millions of shares were traded and the ticker tape, for so long the harbinger of good fortune, could not keep up with the rapid plunge of prices.<sup>14</sup> Despite valiant efforts from some of the major bankers like J P Morgan,<sup>15</sup> the prices continued to fall and as they did, the panic set in.

That thousands of speculators stood to lose everything they had invested was bad enough, but what greatly exacerbated matters was the fact that some bankers had invested the savings of clients in the heady days of the rising market, when it seemed that such speculation was more than justified because of the enormous returns that could be had.<sup>16</sup> Such banks, once the market began to falter, could not meet their normal commitments because they now held wads of useless paper which they could no longer convert into cash. A shortage of currency ensued which naturally alarmed all those depositors who had entrusted their savings to such institutions and they rushed to withdraw their money. The result was a "bank run" which turned into a mass panic. Even the larger banks were thus affected and eventually thousands were forced to close their doors.

Within a four year period the number of banks in the United States declined from 25 568 with assets in excess of \$72 billion, to 14 771, with assets of \$51 billion. Perhaps no figures more dramatically tell the story of the depression. Certainly the depression cannot be attributed solely to banking practices, yet they were intrinsic to its coming. Banks enthusiastically committed themselves to the stock market and investment booms of the 1920s, but of course they were not alone.<sup>17</sup>

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12. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 13.

13. Robertson and Walton, *History of the American Economy*, p. 407.

14. Galbraith, *Great Crash*, pp. 118 - 119.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 123 - 125.

16. See K L Bryant and H C Dethloff, *A History of American Business*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1983, pp. 227 - 230.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 227.

Even the Federal Reserve Board, the federal agency which allowed the government of the United States a measure of control over the banking system, did not take firm enough action to control the money supply and this helped both precipitate and deepen the crisis.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, it was through the banking system that the crisis in the United States assumed world-wide proportions.

The larger banking institutions of the United States had been in the habit of lending money not only domestically, but also abroad, including to the defeated powers of the First World War.<sup>19</sup> The great inflation in Germany in the early 1920s, which so destabilised the country that it threatened to bring about chaos and anarchy, was prompted by the payment in gold of war reparations. Attempting to meet the outrageous demands of the victorious allies, the German government was unable to meet its domestic commitments and the country was teetering on the brink of total collapse. Fighting for survival, the German government printed massive amounts of paper money, but without the gold to back this up in accordance with the gold standard, this merely resulted in inflation on a scale never before witnessed in the capitalist world. This hyperinflation had the printing presses running day and night, printing ever larger denominations of near worthless paper money. So severe was the crisis that the elaborate notes of the Reichsbank gave way to paper money printed on smaller sized paper and on one side only!<sup>20</sup> The Dawes Plan of 1924, and the Young Plan of 1929, had pulled Germany back from the brink by the rescheduling of her debt, and by the massive injection of dollars loaned on a short-term basis by the larger American banks. When these banks suddenly found themselves in trouble at home, they immediately set about recalling their foreign loans.

The consequences were severe indeed, especially in Germany and Austria. In the latter country, one of its largest banks, the Kredit Anstalt, failed as a direct consequence. Not only were American loans recalled, but credit dried up too. The fragile economies of Europe found themselves without capital and, because of the

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18. *Ibid.*, pp. 228 - 229; Robertson and Walton, *History of the American Economy*, pp. 409 - 413.

19. American loans to Europe stood at \$3,5 billion by 1929. F P Chambers, *This Age of Conflict; the Western World, 1914 to the Present*, New York, 1962, p. 304.

20. German banknotes in my possession illustrate this clearly.

crash, without markets. A lack of markets meant a lack of income and as a result, world trade began to shrink dramatically. The spiral of the depression began, because without markets enterprises in Europe (and elsewhere) found themselves having to lay off workers. Such unemployment only resulted in a diminution in the domestic buying power, which in turn led naturally to more unemployment.

But it would be fallacious to attribute the entire economic catastrophe to the chain of events consequent upon the Wall Street Crash, for many economists and economic historians point to other, more subtle and pre-existing economic conditions which undoubtedly also played their role in the tragedy. One of these factors is directly related to the Union of South Africa, as it concerns the overproduction of primary products, particularly agricultural products. During the Great War, other nations of the world began to supply food to the belligerent parties. Their production increased to make good the shortfall occasioned by falling European manpower<sup>21</sup> and the loss of farm land which resulted from the conflict.<sup>22</sup> This was particularly true of the United States, Australia, Canada and some South American countries. Farmers in these countries were encouraged to produce more as prices tended to drift sharply upwards and were at a higher level in the early 1920s than they had been in 1913.<sup>23</sup> The increased production was made possible by the farmers borrowing money and so falling into debt. Indebtedness among farmers world-wide increased dramatically between 1913 and 1928.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, this increased production did not cease when the war ended and so the world market became saturated with an oversupply of agricultural goods after the war. In fact, by 1928, the returns that farmers the world over were receiving for their produce had experienced a marked and steady decline.<sup>25</sup> This did not only apply to food, but to other products like wool, which was also facing stiff competition from newly discovered man-made fibres.<sup>26</sup>

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21. D H Heaton, *Economic History of Europe*, Harper & Row, New York, 1966, p. 673.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 675.

23. Kindleberger, *Depression*, pp. 100 - 107.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

25. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 5.

26. Although rayon had been in use before the war, the difficulties in obtaining supplies of wool during the conflict had promoted its use. After the war, demand for rayon increased substantially. S B Clough and C W Cole, *Economic History of Europe*, D C Heath & Co, Boston, 1966, pp. 544 and 777.

To recoup the losses occasioned by falling prices, farmers produced even more, thus further aggravating the already serious oversupply.<sup>27</sup> While this was often a "knee-jerk" reaction, there were times when the surpluses were deliberate government policy, as in the case of the Soviet Union in the early 1930s. So desperate were the communist rulers to turn their agricultural exports into foreign exchange to buy machinery, that they flooded the world market with wheat while their own peasants starved to death. Some figures serve to illustrate this. In 1929, the USSR exported 100 000 metric tons of grain. By 1930, deliberate policy had seen this increase to 2 290 000, and in 1931 to 5 220 000 tons. Although the amount of grain exported rose dramatically, the returns were actually falling, and did not keep pace with the increasing rate of production.<sup>28</sup>

To complicate matters further, underlying fiscal measures in the shape of tariff barriers prevented free trade, particularly in agricultural products. It was impossible for governments to stockpile the surplus products endlessly, so it had become customary to "dump" the surplus on unsuspecting countries — often at a loss — just so that the farmers in the producing countries would receive some return, no matter how small.<sup>29</sup> This procedure naturally undermined the domestic markets of the receiving countries, as farmers could then not sell their products as the "dumped" goods always undercut domestic prices. To prevent "dumping" and to protect domestic economies, protective tariffs were introduced throughout the world. But this did not only apply to agricultural products; a whole range of domestic industries throughout the world also enjoyed such protection.

The Congress of the United States passed several such measures in the first few decades of the twentieth century.<sup>30</sup> The Fordney-McCumber Act of 1922 and the Hawley-Smoot Act of 1930 protected a whole host of domestic producers.<sup>31</sup> The latter also prompted a rash of similar tariffs and quotas in other countries around

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27. Kindleberger, *Depression*, p. 107.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Bryant and Dethloff, *A History of American Business*, p. 244.

31. C Saint-Etienne, *The Great Depression, 1929-1938: Lessons for the 1980s*, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Stanford, Cal., 1984, p. 13 - 15.

the globe,<sup>32</sup> all of which contributed to a decline in trade. Thus the rise in political nationalism during this period was coupled with a kind of economic nationalism as countries engaged in tit for tat protectionism and strove for national self-sufficiency.<sup>33</sup>

Lastly, but by no means of least importance, was the institution of the gold standard. Adherence to the gold standard required that the value of a country's currency should be determined by a specific mass of gold.<sup>34</sup> But as Lubbe points out, there were many different forms of the standard, variations brought about by convenience and the availability of gold.<sup>35</sup> In 1922, however, the Geneva Convention instituted a new form of the gold standard under which banknotes were no longer freely convertible into gold.<sup>36</sup> Control of the value of a specific currency would thenceforth be in the hands of governments in conjunction with central or reserve banks.<sup>37</sup> By this means, the main trading nations of the world were attempting to impose a measure of stability on exchange rates.<sup>38</sup> But this system could not alleviate the imbalance of international payments, or the loss of confidence in the financial world. These factors tended to nullify the benefits derived from adherence to the gold standard.<sup>39</sup> It is obvious then, that the entire basis upon which the post-war economic system had been constructed was unstable and unpredictable.<sup>40</sup>

When the Austrian and German banks found themselves in difficulties as a result of the withdrawal of short-term loans,<sup>41</sup> British holdings in Germany were frozen,<sup>42</sup>

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32. *Ibid.*, pp. 28 - 29.

33. D H Aldcroft, *The European Economy: 1914-1980*, Croom Helm, London, 1982, p. 83.

34. A J Lubbe, "Die Goudstandaardkwessie in die Suid-Afrikaanse Politiek, 1931-1932", M A thesis, Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1986, p. 1.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-7.

36. P Einzig, *The Destiny of Gold*, MacMillan, London, 1972, p. 36.

37. M Palyi, *The Twilight of Gold, 1914-1936: Myths and Realities*, H G Regnery & Co, Chicago, 1972, p. 113.

38. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture" p. 18.

39. *Ibid.*

40. C R Curtis, *The Gold Standard and the Crisis*, Charles Griffin & Co, London, 1931, p. 31.

41. See above, p. 18.

42. W A Brown, *The International Gold Standard Re-interpreted, 1919-1934*, National Bureau of Economic Research, New York, 1940, pp. 1044 - 1045.

causing panic and the withdrawal of funds from Britain.<sup>43</sup> This compounded the problems caused in 1925 when Great Britain returned to the gold standard with an over-valued pound.<sup>44</sup> Gold was withdrawn from Britain, despite attempts by the Bank of England to keep it in the country by raising the bank rate. Investors wanted to secure their capital and were less concerned about the interest they might earn.<sup>45</sup> Loans from outside Britain failed to improve matters<sup>46</sup> and eventually, on 21 September 1931, Britain was forced to leave the standard.<sup>47</sup>

The value of the British pound sterling fell from its traditional level of \$4,86 to \$3,25<sup>48</sup> and this set up a ripple effect in the Empire and in Europe.<sup>49</sup> Countries which had Britain as a major trading partner had to follow suit, as they suddenly found their goods more expensive in Britain, while British goods became cheaper in their own countries, thus upsetting their balance of trade.<sup>50</sup> The Union of South Africa refused to follow suit, a decision which was to have dire consequences for the South African economy.<sup>51</sup>

While the gold standard was undoubtedly a major cause of instability, its effects were exacerbated by the prevailing woes of the capitalist world. Some of the effects of the slump have already been outlined but perhaps it remains to point out the cost in human terms of this "crisis of capitalism". Stevenson and Cook, in their study of the effects of the depression in the United Kingdom, highlighted the social impact of unemployment, poverty and the general feeling of helplessness, and held that the experience was imprinted on the "collective consciousness" of the British people.<sup>52</sup> Other studies from elsewhere in the world also highlight these aspects.<sup>53</sup>

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43. R G Hawtrey, *The Gold Standard in Theory and Practice*, Longmans, Green & Co, London, 1947, pp. 134 - 135.

44. Lubbe, "Goudstandaardkwessie", p. 8.

45. Rees, *Great Slump*, p. 185.

46. Lubbe, "Goudstandaardkwessie", p. 12.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

48. Latham, *Depression*, p. 57.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 58 and Heaton, *Economic History of Europe*, pp. 702 - 703.

50. Latham, *Depression*, pp. 58 - 66.

51. This will be discussed at length below.

52. Stevenson and Cook, *The Slump*, pp. 3 - 4.

53. See for example K Amos, *The New Guard Movement, 1931-1935*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1976; W K Hancock, *Survey of British Commonwealth Affairs*, Vol. 2, *Problems of Economic Policy, 1918-1939*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1940; Kindleberger, *Depression*; Latham, *Depression*; W Woytinsky, *The Social Consequences of the Economic Depression*, International Labour Organisation, Geneva, 1936.

Unemployment occurred on a massive scale in the main industrialised countries. By 1933 there were three million unemployed in Britain, five million in Germany and at least six million in the United States.<sup>54</sup> This massive unemployment was perhaps the most obvious and tangible of the effects of the depression on ordinary people who experienced them. Statistical analyses and graphs of the decline in Gross Domestic Product meant little to those not initiated into their mysteries, but those accustomed to work surely felt the impact when their livelihoods were removed — for reasons which they could not even begin to fathom — and they and their dependants suddenly felt the cutting edge of poverty. Wotinsky put it well:

The tragic aspect of the situation of the workers during the depression was that they were struggling with an unseen foe. They felt the presence of the depression; they were in its grip; but they could not see whence it came and they did not know how to fight it.<sup>55</sup>

The Union of South Africa, although far removed from the great financial capitals, was nevertheless part of the world economy through its dependence on trade. The Union was largely a producer of primary products, many of which were exported for further processing overseas.<sup>56</sup> As the economies of the major industrialised countries waxed and waned, the South African market responded. This is nowhere more evident than in the way in which the agricultural sector of the South African economy was affected by the rapid decline in prices during the latter half of the 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>57</sup>

Long before the Wall Street Crash, the ills of the domestic agricultural sector were becoming apparent. Declining prices had already made themselves felt during the latter half of the decade, particularly among the most important agricultural exports — wool, sugar, tobacco, wattle bark and wattle extract, skins and hides, maize and mohair.<sup>58</sup> These falls in price, caused largely by the oversupply to markets in the

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54. J Tinbergen, *Lessons from the Past*, Elsevier Pub. Co, New York, 1963, pp. 60 - 61; Aldcroft, *European Economy*, p. 94. Some authors put the figure as high as 13 million in the United States alone. See H N Scheiber, H G Vatter and H U Faulkner, *American Economic History*, Harper and Row, New York, 1976, p. 357.

55. Wotinsky, *Social Consequences*, p. 192.

56. Nattrass, *South African Economy*, pp. 110 - 111.

57. See above, pp. 20 - 21.

58. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 21.



developed world, impacted negatively on the fortunes of local farmers. At the very best of times, farming was a risky venture. The weather, pests and diseases often acted in concert to undermine the profitability of the commercial farmer. Indeed, during the depression years, natural disasters joined with the prevailing economic situation (both domestically and overseas) to rob the South African farmers of their expected profits, as there were plagues of locusts, tsetse flies and mosquitoes. More serious than any of these, however, was the great drought that turned much of the interior of the country into a wasteland.

Farmers regarded natural calamities as part and parcel of their farming operations and accepted them as such. But they could not be blamed for despairing when they experienced all of them at the same time. The cumulative effect of all these natural disasters coupled with their existing economic hardships ... came very close to crippling permanently the farming industry in South Africa.<sup>59</sup>

When instability of price for the final product was added into the formula, it became a recipe for disaster.

Farmers could never be certain what price their produce would fetch on the open (overseas) market and, despite tariff protection afforded some products, and attempts at price control of others through control boards, their fortunes had been in decline throughout the latter half of the 1920s.<sup>60</sup> Many farmers responded to the decline in their incomes by increasing production, further saturating the market and driving prices even further downwards. To make matters worse, many farmers had saddled themselves with large debts, incurred during the heady days of the First World War, when capital was needed for expansion and mechanisation. Prices were to fall even further during the depression, as the already oversupplied markets shrank with the reduction in the spending power of the consumers who were the end-users. The laws of supply and demand worked to the detriment of the South African farmer, not only overseas, but also domestically.

Agricultural products such as wool, mohair, maize, skins, hides, tobacco, wattle bark, wattle extract and sugar, formed the basis of agricultural exports, earning the country valuable income. However, the declining demand for agricultural produce

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59. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

60. *Ibid.*, pp. 33 - 135.

on the world market saw the income of producers fall by £5 million in the second half of 1929 alone.<sup>61</sup> This unhealthy situation continued to deteriorate as can be clearly illustrated by the decline in the value of agricultural produce, livestock and food exported between 1928 and 1931. In 1928, such exports totalled £31 820 000, but fell drastically to only £12 936 000 in 1931, rising marginally again in 1932 to a total of £13 373 000.<sup>62</sup> This decline does not reveal the full extent of the problem, as these figures only represent exports. If the domestic market is included, as Minnaar has shown, the value of agricultural production in South Africa also fell precipitously, declining by almost 70 per cent between 1929 and 1932.<sup>63</sup>

Obviously some geographical areas and agricultural sectors were more affected than others but generally, by 1933, farmers countrywide were on the brink of ruin. Stock losses ran into the millions, and it was to be several years before the South African farmer recovered from the trauma of this period, and then only with considerable government assistance.<sup>64</sup>

Yet the agricultural sector was only one of the major economic sectors in the country which was hard hit by the depression and drought. Other sectors were also directly linked to world trade and therefore to the fluctuations of the world business and trade cycle. The products of the great mineral wealth of the country were largely exported. Diamonds, which had been one of the major exports of the Union, earning £10 751 126 in 1929, suddenly found no market in the depressed conditions overseas and the prices obtained fell dramatically, from 80s 8d per carat in 1929, to only 35s 1d in 1932. This had severe repercussions on the local diamond mines and related industries, with certain mines being closed and others placed on short time. Eventually, in 1932, most diamond mining ceased altogether as stockpiles of stones had been built up. Workers were laid off until conditions improved. The value of diamonds exported in 1933 was a paltry £991 540.<sup>65</sup>

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61. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

62. Union of South Africa, *Year Book*, No.18, 1937, p. 975 and pp. 1009 - 1010.

63. *Ibid.*

64. For a full discussion of the various misfortunes that plagued South African farmers, see Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", pp. 186 - 198.

65. Union of South Africa, *Year Book*, No. 17, 1934-35, p. 661.

Although only approximately 10 per cent of the Union's coal production was exported, another 10 per cent was sold as bunkering coal to steamships and can thus also be included in "exports". The price of coal fell continuously throughout the depression<sup>66</sup> and, although the falls were certainly not precipitous, it is interesting to note that the price of coal from the mines in Natal fell by 12,4 per cent between 1928 and 1932, a much greater percentage than the 2,3 per cent fall in prices of coal from the mines in the Transvaal during the same period. This was due to the fact that Natal mines depended very heavily on exports and bunkering, while the Transvaal mines catered for the internal market. However, a number of warm winters on the highveld reduced the internal demand for coal, so the true picture of the decline of the Union coal-mining industry is only revealed when production levels are taken into account. Union coal production fell from 13 913 000 tons to 10 650 000 tons between 1929 and 1932 (some 23 per cent), while the value of coal fell by 28 per cent in the corresponding period.<sup>67</sup> Again, the slump in this sector of the mining industry had severe repercussions, especially in Natal, where several of the mines were closed or placed on short time, resulting in further unemployment and hardship.

Only in the gold-mining sector was the situation any better.<sup>68</sup> Katzen has pointed out that gold played a crucial role in sheltering the Union economy from the worst effects of the depression, when other sectors of the economy were to collapse before the onslaught.<sup>69</sup> This view is supported by D Hobart Houghton and C G W Schumann, both of whom point out that if the price of gold is maintained then during times of domestic depression the decline in production costs makes gold mining more profitable.<sup>70</sup> Not only did this factor allow the operations of the "marginal" mines to continue,<sup>71</sup> but it also enabled dividends to be maintained.

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66. P E Hall, "The Coal Industry in the Union of South Africa," *South African Journal of Economics*, Vol. 16, 1948, p. 248.

67. Ravenscroft, "Depression", pp. 20 - 21.

68. D G Fransen and H J J Reynders (eds), *Die Ekonomiese Lewe van Suid-Afrika*. Pretoria, 1963, p. 55.

69. Katzen, *Gold*, p. 29.

70. Hobart Houghton, *South African Economy*, pp. 112 - 113; Schumann, *Structural Changes*, p. 333.

71. Ravenscroft, "Depression", p. 69.

Employment on these mines actually increased during the depression.<sup>72</sup> As Schumann wrote:

Summing up, we may say that the total effect of the gold-mining industry on the general business cycle of South Africa, through the demand for labour and the distribution of the total mining income, has been distinctly stabilizing. In this respect South Africa is in a unique and very fortunate position.<sup>73</sup>

When Britain left the gold standard in September 1931, the price of gold rose and this rise continued when the Union Government left the standard in December 1932. By 1934, the gold price had increased by a massive 60 per cent.<sup>74</sup> Not only did the gold mines remain profitable during the depression, but it bears emphasising that they maintained and even increased employment at a time when unemployment in other sectors of the economy was rife. The gold mines also had a "ripple effect" as their increased consumption of goods helped to buoy up the otherwise stagnant local economy. The gold mines spent £36 000 000 in the Union in 1931, of which £15 200 000 was spent on wages and £16 000 000 on stores and supplies. Furthermore, it was argued that 33 per cent of all government revenue was attributable, in one form or another, to the gold-mining industry.<sup>75</sup>

This assertion is borne out by the following table, in which the net contribution of the gold-mining sector to the national income of the Union is made quite clear. Of particular interest must be the large increase between 1931/32 and 1932/33, the result of the Union leaving the gold standard.

**Table 2.1**  
**Net contributions of various mining industries**  
**to the national income of the Union of South Africa**  
**in £ millions**

Year	Gold	Other	Total
1928/29	31,1	13,9	45
1929/30	32,4	11,4	43,8
1930/31	32,4	7,0	39,4
1931/32	34,8	4,4	39,2
1932/33	51,7	4,7	56,4
1933/34	53,6	4,8	58,4

**Source: Katzen, *Gold*, pp. 48 - 49.**

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72. Hobart Houghton, *South African Economy*, pp. 112 - 113.  
73. Schumann, *Structural changes*, p. 333.  
74. Katzen, *Gold*, p. 29.  
75. Ravenscroft, "Depression", pp. 70 - 71.

The economic growth of the Union was dependent on imports, particularly of the machinery required to nurture its nascent industrial capacity. In the early decades of this century consumer items were also largely imported.<sup>76</sup> The Union of South Africa then, could be classed very much as a "developing nation", although its great mineral wealth gave it a position in the world economy different to that of other developing nations within the British Empire.<sup>77</sup>

However, since the import/export relationship is often used by economists as an indicator of the health of an economy, it is worthwhile examining this for the period of the depression.

**Table 2.2**

**Annual Value of Imports into the Union (including Government stores) but excluding specie, and Annual Value of Exports (including ship stores)**

Year	Imports (£)	Exports (£)
1928	79 087 656	96 460 170
1929	83 449 196	97 757 484
1930	64 558 504	83 409 477
1931	52 945 175	71 829 564
1932	32 672 539	68 938 001
1933	49 121 020	95 275 389

**Source:** Union of South Africa, *Union Year Book*, No. 16, 1933/34, pp. 597, 602.

It is interesting to note that while imports fell by almost 59 per cent between 1928 and 1932, exports only declined by approximately 29 per cent in the same period, a result of the stabilising influence of gold exports. This had a fairly positive effect on the balance of payments, but indicates to what extent the domestic market for imported goods had declined.

The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the Union reflects a similar decline during the depression years, as Table 1.3 shows:

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76. Nattrass, *South African Economy*, p. 269.

77. Latham, *Depression*, pp. 170 - 171.

**Table 2.3**  
**Gross Domestic Product of the Union of South Africa**  
**in £ millions as calculated at 31 December each year**

Year	GDP
1928	299,05
1929	295,75
1930	276,8
1931	247,8
1932	231,75
1933	265,4
1934	298,2

**Source:** J J Stadler, "Die Bruto Binnelandse Produk van Suid-Afrika, 1911-1959", D.Comm. thesis, University of Pretoria, 1962, p. 503.<sup>78</sup>

The GDP therefore, declined by £67,3 million between 1928 and 1932, or by some 23 per cent.<sup>79</sup> The GDP of 1932 was the lowest since the disastrous year of 1922, when the strike by miners on the Witwatersrand and the post-war depression had disrupted the economy.<sup>80</sup> The real Net Domestic Product calculated on a per capita basis fell from £31 18s in 1928 to £24 8s in 1932.<sup>81</sup>

As the economy spiralled deeper and deeper into depression economic activity slowed, resulting in cost-cutting measures to keep business enterprises afloat. One of the largest cost factors in most enterprises is labour and it therefore stands to reason that labour costs were trimmed. This was done in several ways; short time was introduced, more expensive labour was replaced by cheaper labour, and wages were cut. If all else failed, workers were retrenched. Such retrenchments had further unforeseen consequences in that the buying power of retrenched workers was greatly diminished, further shrinking demand, especially for consumer items. This resulted in enterprises supplying these items becoming unprofitable and more workers being laid off, thus continuing the downward spiral of the depression.

The Hertzog government became aware of the rising tide of unemployment in the Union, but their appreciation of the problem was limited as their statistics were

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78. Stadler uses rands, but I have converted these to pounds on the basis of R2 = £1.

79. Edley, "Population", p. 4.

80. Stadler, "Bruto Binnelandse Produk", p. 503.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 518.

based on the numbers of white males registered as unemployed with the Department of Labour offices in urban areas and the Post Office exchanges in rural areas. There was no unemployment insurance in the Union at that time<sup>82</sup> and there was no obligation placed on the unemployed to register as unemployed. The Department of Labour acted merely as a placement agency, directing men where employment could be found, either on relief works or in private enterprise. When there seemed to be little likelihood of employment, men either did not register or did not renew their monthly registrations. The Divisional Inspector of the Department of Labour in Durban, Mr M Tobias, put it thus:

There is no compulsory registration, so the Department is unable to give an accurate estimate of the actual number out of employment. Although we are in fairly close touch with the position in Durban, it must be realised that there is obviously no incentive for men to register when there is almost no likelihood of the Department being able to find vacancies for these persons to fill.<sup>83</sup>

This was by no means a local problem, as the Minister of Labour, Colonel Cresswell, had admitted in 1931 that the government had only a vague idea of the unemployment situation for the number of registered unemployed did not reflect the true situation.<sup>84</sup> A Durban Member of Parliament, Mr H B Borlase, suggested that not only was the situation twice as bad as it seemed, but no account was being taken of dependants of the unemployed. The Carnegie Commission did include dependants when it reported in 1932 that 300 000 white South Africans were "very poor" and were living below the poverty datum line.<sup>85</sup>

It is also worth noting that very little was done at the time to document the unemployment of women or people of colour.<sup>86</sup> The prevailing ethos was that the government's first priority should lie with adult white males.

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82. R H Davies, *Capital, State and White Labour, 1910-1960*, Harvester Press, Brighton, 1979, p. 90 (Note 9) and pp. 316 - 317.

83. *Natal Mercury*, 16 April 1932.

84. *Natal Mercury*, 29 September 1931.

85. J J Breitenbach, *South Africa in the Modern World (1910-1970)*, Shuter and Shooter, Pietermaritzburg, 1977, pp. 371 - 372. These figures mean that one out of every five white South Africans fell into this category.

86. See below pp. 209 - 210.

Even though the statistics have severe limitations, the unemployment situation in the Union must be examined through this avenue, as there is no other analytic tool available to the researcher. The unemployment statistics of the Union reveal that in 1929 there were approximately 3 800 white men registered as unemployed with the Department of Labour.<sup>87</sup> Registrations increased steadily throughout the depression, reaching a peak of 39 309 in October 1933.<sup>88</sup> Actually there were only some 13 703 white men registered as unemployed at that point, but the figure of 39 309 includes those whites employed on relief works.<sup>89</sup> It has been argued that relief works were nothing other than "disguised unemployment", for they did not create full-time long-term employment. Employment on relief works was inferior, was performed at a reduced rate of wages, and was only accepted in the face of unemployment in the formal sector of the economy.

The argument is, no doubt, that these persons would have been idle had it not been for relief works, at best; it is a matter of "disguised unemployment".<sup>90</sup>

It is necessary therefore, to keep the number of men employed on relief works in mind when endeavouring to recreate the unemployment situation that prevailed in the Union during the depression years.

**Table 2.4**  
**Index of Employment in the Union, 1928 - 1935**  
**(Base year July 1925 = 1 000)**

Year	Whites	Blacks
1928	1 126	1 093
1929	1 159	1 108
1930	1 129	1 090
1931	1 084	1 041
1932	1 015	965
1933	1 047	1 014
1934	1 162	1 141
1935	1 272	1 282

**Source:** Union of South Africa, *Year Book*, No. 18, 1937, p. 923 and No. 19, 1938, p. 912.

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87. Ravenscroft, "Depression", p. 46.  
88. Davies, *Capital*, p. 247.  
89. Union of South Africa, *Report of the Department of Labour*, U.G. 37/1933, p. 5.  
90. Ravenscroft, "Depression", p. 47.



The apparent conflict over which year represents the nadir of the depression in the Union is easily explained. The depression did not manifest itself evenly over the whole of the Union simultaneously; the situation in the urban areas was worst in September/October 1932, while the situation in the rural areas continued to decline in 1933, probably as a result of the prevailing drought, locust infestations and an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease.<sup>91</sup> Be this as it may, it is now generally accepted that the turning point of the depression was in October 1932.<sup>92</sup>

As the depression worsened and the ranks of the unemployed were swollen by further retrenchments and population migration to the major urban centres, the question of ultimate responsibility for alleviating the distress began to arise. Unlike governments in most other countries of the world affected by the depression, the Union government, headed by Hertzog, was slow to accept ultimate responsibility for the solution to the problem in urban areas. It preferred to force local authorities to meet most of the attached costs and used the depression to advance greatly the implementation of their "civilised labour" policies throughout both the state and private sectors of the economy.

The local authorities, however, while doing what they could, were not prepared to incur debts to assist any other than their own burgesses. Individual capacities to assist also varied greatly from town to town, often forcing unemployed people to migrate to where the capacity to assist was greater. Most assistance provided by the state, at local, provincial and even central government level, was in the form of relief works which involved strenuous forms of manual labour, which was not feasible for all the unemployed. Conditions on the relief works were such that men were not encouraged to stay any longer than was absolutely necessary. Many of the unemployed considered such work for the low wages paid as beneath them and so refused this type of assistance. No one in government wanted to create an entire class of people dependent on the state for employment; nor were any measures such as cash payments to assist the unemployed (the "dole") ever contemplated during the depression years. The official view, shared by a large proportion of the unemployed themselves, was that such assistance was charity and was degrading and demeaning

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91. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

92. Schumann, *Structural changes*, pp. 245 - 252.

and would not contribute towards social upliftment, but would ultimately destroy the work ethic of the people.

A small proportion of the unemployed were enterprising enough to eke out a living in the informal sector of the economy, although some of their activities, such as the sale of liquor to Africans, were illegal. Some others became charity cases and "milked" the situation for all it was worth. To combat this, efforts were made at the local level to co-ordinate assistance to ensure that it was evenly distributed.

In the rural areas, however, great expense and effort was expended in assisting the "poor whites". Numerous schemes were instituted to keep farmers on their farms and to provide relief for those forced to leave. Vast amounts of scarce state resources were expended in bringing relief to farmers, which helps to explain why the government was hampered in doing more for the urban unemployed.<sup>93</sup>

Very little was done to improve the situation of race groups other than white, or of women. Ultimately, what was done was barely adequate and the distress caused by the most visible effect of the depression was to live on, long after the economy recovered and the unemployed were reabsorbed.

Unemployment was one of the more tangible effects of the depression, for it affected many in the Union. The psychological effects on people raised to believe that work was both a divine institution and a human necessity were severe. Many complained of social inadequacy, despondency, chronic depression and a feeling of helplessness.<sup>94</sup> Many men were unable to fulfil their role as breadwinners and some simply deserted their families, unable to bear the stress of failure. The unemployed felt trapped in a web of circumstances beyond their control; it was almost as if unemployment were a divine visitation for which no human agency could be held responsible.<sup>95</sup> Some of the unemployed found ways to make a living in what may only be termed the "informal sector" of the economy, selling homemade articles, matches, meat to Africans in compounds and even liquor, to make ends meet.

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93. For a full discussion of unemployment and relief see A Minnaar, "Unemployment and Relief Measures during the Great Depression (1929-1934)", *Kleio*, 26, 1994.

94. See letter from "Grudge against Society" in *Natal Mercury*, 19 November 1930.

95. Rees, *Great Slump*, p. 89.

Another result of unemployment was migration, as many were forced to leave the rural areas and migrate to the towns to seek work. Hurwitz wrote this of the situation in Natal:

Rapid rural depopulation was caused by the depression of 1929-32 when, during a prolonged period of low prices for agricultural products, farmers' incomes dropped so low that the desire to remain on the land weakened considerably. Opportunities for economic improvement were therefore sought in the urban areas. The depression also resulted in foreclosures on farm properties and even some of those who wished to remain were forced to leave.<sup>96</sup>

Although these remarks pertain to Natal, they apply equally to the situation in the rest of the Union. There were other reasons for the rapid urbanisation of the population, as Smith pointed out:

...Furthermore, charity and relief are better organised in the towns, so that there is a minimum standard of life (however low) below which urban families rarely sink. This in itself, is an attraction to the depressed classes of the rural community.<sup>97</sup>

Lewis, in his study of the "poor whites", also supported this contention.<sup>98</sup> The rapid urbanisation of the population of the Union is obvious when one contrasts the census statistics for 1921 with those of 1936.<sup>99</sup>

Table 2.5

Population in Urban Areas expressed as a percentage of the whole of that Province and of the Union, 1921-1936.

Province	Year	Whites	Coloureds	Asians	Africans
Cape	1921	57,8	51,2	95,7	8,5
	1936	65,1	55,1	98,1	11,0
Natal	1921	74,3	61,8	55,8	7,5
	1936	79,4	69,4	66,9	9,7
Trans-vaal	1921	64,2	68,1	86,7	24,3
	1936	72,5	77,8	88,1	29,6
O.F.S.	1921	41,9	36,9	-	16,1
	1936	49,9	50,5	-	21,0
Union	1921	59,55	54,5	79,4	14,1
	1936	66,73	63,2	84,4	17,8

Source: Union of South Africa, *Year Book of Statistics*, 1937, p. 10.

These figures show that fairly rapid urbanisation of all population groups had taken place in the period between the censuses and, although there was some degree of urbanisation in the years following the depression, it is clear that much of the migration occurred during the depression years. The influx to the towns naturally placed an added burden on the ratepayers of such towns, as they then became responsible for the welfare of their fellow citizens. Cries went up to the government to try and stop the influx and, although the government did much to try and keep the farmers on the land and the blacks in their reserves,<sup>100</sup> residential qualifications for assistance were soon imposed by most towns. Government officials and local magistrates were virtually helpless. Despite the considerable obstacles placed in their paths, unemployed whites still streamed into the urban areas, arousing considerable antipathy from the inhabitants. While there was general hostility towards the influx of unemployed whites, there was a very limited measure of understanding for their plight, but no such understanding extended to the black population. On the contrary, the prevailing *idée fixe* was that blacks were merely "temporary sojourners" in the urban areas, tolerated as long as their labour was required. When their labour was no longer required it was expected that they should return to the rural areas from whence they had come. The situation in the rural areas was every bit as desperate (if not more so) for blacks as it was for whites,<sup>101</sup> but the unemployed blacks were still expected to return to their homes in the rural areas.

However comforting this idea might have been to the white segregationists of the time, the truth of the matter was that in certain areas of the country, hard hit by the depression and the prevailing drought, the inhabitants had no other option but to make their way to the towns to survive. Despite measures taken by local

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96. N Hurwitz, *Agriculture in Natal*, 1957, p. 17.

97. R H Smith, *Labour Resources of Natal*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1950, p. 25.

98. Lewis, "Poor White Problem". See particularly Chapter 2.

99. The census of 1931 was scaled down as an economy measure and was restricted to the white population alone.

100. These measures will be discussed in a later chapter.

101. As the Native Economic Commission revealed. See also Lacey, *Boroko*.

authorities,<sup>102</sup> there is no doubt that practically all the urban areas of the Union experienced a large influx of blacks during the depression. Such an influx posed problems of control for the authorities and a number of measures were implemented to deal with the black population.

Political activity in the Union was also affected by the depression, as might have been expected. It is axiomatic that political activity during a time of economic crisis will exhibit different characteristics to politics in a time of relative wealth and prosperity. The Great Depression, 1929-1933, has been described as a "crisis of capitalism";<sup>103</sup> a period in which the capitalist system suffered a severe setback, probably the most severe setback in recorded history. This setback starkly illustrated the inability of the system to maintain the level of material benefits which could be derived from it; a level of benefits to which the population of the western world had become accustomed. Mass unemployment, poverty and a decline in living standards were all signs of failure. It is not surprising then, that there were many the world over who began to question the system.

...Nor was it only the direct victims of the depression who were affected by it. Others, observing what was happening to their fellow-men, began to wonder what kind of justification there was for a society which produced such results. The depression ceased to be merely an economic problem; it became a question mark directed at the values of western civilisation and there were many who, finding no satisfactory answer, decided that there was no alternative other than to build a new society on totally different principles.<sup>104</sup>

This kind of questioning, sprung of discontent, was evident in most western countries during the depression years and often led to the restructuring of political groupings, the formation of new political parties and movements, or the formation of coalition groupings. Sometimes the new movements were of an extremist nature, seeing salvation only in a drastic reshaping of society. Not all were anti-capitalist, but most were vocal in their condemnation of the system's perceived shortcomings.

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102. Such measures included the tightening up of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 through an amendment in 1930 (Act 25 of 1930).

103. Rees, *Great Slump*, pp. 281 - 282.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

It is impossible to exclude the Union of South Africa from this trend, for there is ample indication of it, but it must be borne in mind that comparatively, the Union was far less affected than some other capitalist powers. It did not suffer the same degree of mass unemployment, social dislocation and upheaval, as did the United States, United Kingdom, Germany or even Australia. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of the Union certainly felt that the Great Depression was the worst economic crisis they had yet faced. Economics did not, however, entirely dominate the domestic political scene, for there were other significant issues which distracted the attention of the politicians, especially in the early years of the depression.

One such issue was the "Native Question". The General Election of 1929 had been fought almost entirely on this issue.<sup>105</sup> In a well-orchestrated campaign, the National Party (N P) government was able to play on the fears of the electorate. Smuts, leader of the South African Party (S A P), inadvertently played right into the hands of the Nationalists when he made a speech in which he said he foresaw a time when other territories in southern Africa would join the Union. Pointing to the large black population in the territories mentioned by Smuts, the Nationalists accused him of wanting to add to the "Native Problem" and even accused him of wanting to form a "Kaffir Republic".<sup>106</sup> These "swart gevaar" tactics persuaded the largely white electorate to return the Nationalists to power with an overall majority for the first time.<sup>107</sup> Yet even this victory was not sufficient to extricate the so-called "Hertzog Bills" from the legislative quagmire maintained by the S A P since 1926, and the "Native Question" remained unsolved.<sup>108</sup>

Another issue of significance was the relationship of the Union to Britain. The Hertzog government was eager to loosen the ties that bound the Union to Britain. The passage of the Statute of Westminster in 1931 had largely been as a result of Hertzog's efforts, and fears had been aroused among English-speakers in the Union

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105. T R H Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History*, (3rd ed.), MacMillan, Johannesburg, 1987, p. 271.

106. R Lacour-Gayet, *A History of South Africa*, Cassel, London, 1977, p. 271.

107. Davenport, *Modern South Africa*, Appendix 2.

108. For a full discussion of this issue see R J Haines, "The Opposition to General Hertzog's Segregation Bills, 1925-1936 : A Study in Extra-Parliamentary Protest", M A thesis, University of Natal (Durban), 1978.

that Hertzog intended to form an Afrikaner republic.<sup>109</sup> Fear of the erosion of their British citizenship rights and threats of increased "Afrikanerisation" caused many English-speakers, particularly in Natal, to view almost every act of the Hertzog government as a threat against their heritage. An attempt by the government to abolish the provincial councils, ostensibly as an economy measure, thus resulted in a furore of significant proportions,<sup>110</sup> which had important repercussions on the national political scene.<sup>111</sup>

Turning to the Hertzog government's handling of the economic crisis, the major bone of contention was undoubtedly its handling of what became known as the "Gold Standard Crisis".<sup>112</sup> When Britain left the gold standard in September 1931,<sup>113</sup> the Union government, through the Department of Finance, announced that the Union intended remaining on the standard.<sup>114</sup> Advocate N C Havenga, Minister of Finance, advanced the rationale that as the world's largest gold-producer, the Union could and would demonstrate its confidence in the metal as the basis of the international monetary system.<sup>115</sup> Hertzog put it even more forcefully at the Cape Congress of the National Party in October 1931:

The position of a country which leaves the Gold Standard is precisely the same as that of a ship that sails in bad weather, throws away its rudder, lifts its anchor and gives itself over to the mercy of the waves. You never know when you are above or below the waves, when you are going to run aground on the rocks..."<sup>116</sup>

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109. C F J Muller, *Five Hundred Years : A History of South Africa*, Academica, Cape Town, 1969, p. 406.

110. For a full discussion of this issue see Vickers, "Provincial Councils" and Walker, "Provincial Councils".

111. See below p. 326.

112. For a full discussion of this issue see Lubbe, "Goudstandaardkwessie".

113. Rees, *Great Slump*, p. 189.

114. Lubbe, "Goudstandaardkwessie", p. 18.

115. O Pirow, *James Barry Munnik Hertzog*, n.d., p. 139.

116. Report in *Die Burger*, 2 October 1931, quoted in Lubbe, "Goudstandaardkwessie", p. 18. (My translation.)

This stance, later supported by a Parliamentary Select Committee (on which the N P naturally had a majority)<sup>117</sup> did not find favour with many in Natal, who saw it as a government attempt to demonstrate the Union's economic independence of Britain.<sup>118</sup>

Furthermore, the stance did not make economic sense, as Britain remained South Africa's largest trading partner. By going off gold, Britain had effectively devalued sterling by almost 30 per cent. This meant that British goods became 30 per cent cheaper in the Union, but more importantly, South African products became 30 per cent more expensive in Britain.<sup>119</sup> This had a severe effect on the producers of primary products, particularly those farmers who depended on the export market.<sup>120</sup> At a time of overproduction, with markets flooded, few buyers were going to spend more on South African products when they could obtain the same products more cheaply from other countries within the empire which had also devalued their currencies to the same level as sterling. Agitation among the farmers of the Union, many of whom were also supporters of the National Party, grew apace in 1932<sup>121</sup> and speculators began to remove large amounts of capital from the Union, in anticipation of the government leaving the gold standard.<sup>122</sup> This was despite the fact that the government tried, through export subsidies, to make good the losses that some farmers were suffering. Hertzog's support among the farmers dwindled, as many were finding a political home in Dr Steenkamp's Farmers' and Workers' Party. It appears that Hertzog was all too well aware of his diminishing support,<sup>123</sup> but having committed his government to stand or fall by the gold standard, he could not alter his stance without damaging his credibility.

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117. Union of South Africa, *Report of the Select Committee on the Gold Standard*, S.C. 9/1932. It may be noted that the SAP members of the Committee resigned *en bloc* as soon as they were appointed.

118. Pirow, *Hertzog*, p. 139 and *Natal Mercury*, 2 December 1931.

119. Davenport, *Modern South Africa*, p. 213.

120. For a discussion of this issue see A de V Minnaar, "The Farmers and the Gold Standard Crisis, 1931-32", *Journal for Contemporary History*, Vol. 14, No. 1, June 1989.

121. A G Barlow, *Almost in Confidence*, Juta, Johannesburg, 1952, p. 238 and D W Kruger, *Making of a Nation*, MacMillan, Johannesburg, 1969, p. 160.

122. Pirow, *Hertzog*, p. 145 and Katzen, *Gold*, p. 29.

123. D E Kaplan, "An Analysis of the South African State in the Fusion Period, 1932-1939", University of London, *Institute of Commonwealth Studies, Collected Seminar Papers*, Vol. 7, No. 21, 1977, p. 153.



In the event, his hand was forced by Tielman Roos, former Nationalist Party Cabinet Minister and Leader of the National Party in the Transvaal, then a Judge of Appeal.<sup>124</sup> Rumours had been circulating towards the end of 1932 that Roos would step down from the Bench and return to politics and, either on his own, or in concert with General Smuts's S A P,<sup>125</sup> or Dr Steenkamp's movement,<sup>126</sup> would force the Hertzog government from office. On the announcement of his resignation from the Bench, a rush of capital estimated at several million pounds left the country and the government was forced to leave the gold standard on 27 December 1932.<sup>127</sup> From that moment on, it seemed that the depression had begun to lift. Actually, as has been shown, the depression had bottomed out in October of 1932, but the departure from gold seemed to be a visible sign that the government had reversed its earlier disastrous policy.

Departure from gold did not immediately ameliorate the position of the farmers of the Union, as the widespread drought was still hampering their recovery.<sup>128</sup> The idea of the formation of a "Government of National Unity" as propounded by Roos, had really taken root in the political minds of the electorate, and agitation to this end continued. Neither Smuts nor Hertzog trusted Roos, seeing him as the worst kind of political opportunist; neither would commit himself to any sort of alliance with him. However, it was obvious to both leaders that there were sound reasons for burying the political hatchet in some sort of coalition. In February 1933, the two leaders agreed on the formation of a coalition government.<sup>129</sup>

The coalition and later fusion of the two major political parties seemed to defuse many of the underlying tensions and to allay the fears of many. Most of the extremist political groupings which had sprung up during the depression began to wither, losing support to the centre coalition. It is true that the fusion resulted in the

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124. Kruger, *Making of a Nation*, p. 160.

125. *Ibid.*, p. 161.

126. J P Brits, *Tielman Roos: Sy Rol in die Suid-Afrikaanse Politiek*, Makro-Boeke, Pretoria, 1979, p. 373.

127. Katzen, *Gold*, p. 29.

128. Kruger, *Making of a Nation*, p. 158.

129. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

new United Party being somewhat weakened by the formation, from within the ranks of the two joining parties, of the Dominion Party of Colonel Stallard and the Purified National Party of Dr Malan, but these were not immediately significant, and the political climate was greatly improved by the coalition: this was the alliance that most believed could effectively combat the lingering after-effects of the depression.

The late 1920s saw a great upsurge in African militancy throughout the country. The activities of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union and its breakaway Natal branch, the ICU *yase* Natal, were a cause of great concern to the ruling white authorities. When this political militancy flared into open violence in 1929, the concern deepened. Interestingly, this took place in Natal, which highlighted the key role the province was playing in African politics in the Union. The Durban Beer Hall riots had sent a *frisson* of fear through the bureaucracy, for they had taken place in a densely populated urban area during a time of perceived prosperity. It was suggested that the "danger" from Africans would be much greater when the full effects of the world depression reached the Union. The issue of controlling African political activity therefore became of paramount importance. Not only did the state feel obliged to restore order and inculcate a healthy respect for the law, but additional measures were also indicated: firmer control over the "surplus" populations of Africans in urban areas would have to be exercised and more effective ways of dealing with so-called agitators would also have to be found.<sup>130</sup> To achieve these goals, additional powers were sought from parliament.<sup>131</sup>

Blacks politics in the Union was in a far from healthy state during the depression years. Riven with factions and hampered by an increasingly ominous financial crisis, the African National Congress was largely ineffective and ineffectual. The shortage of funds due to unpaid subscriptions was hampering the organisation in carrying out its functions. In an effort to recoup its losses the President, Pixley Seme, was engaged in a process of re-incorporating traditional leaders (who were supposed to supply the bulk of these funds) into the organisation in a more meaningful way. By

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130. Ironically, these were the very aims of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923. See T R H Davenport, *The Beginnings of Urban Segregation in South Africa: The Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 and its background*, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University, Occasional Paper No. 15, 1971.

131. These measures will be discussed in Chapter Ten.

so doing, Seme was actually further alienating some of the organisation's support, which was critical of the role "backward" and "uncivilised" chiefs were playing in the organisation. Little meaningful was therefore achieved during the depression years.<sup>132</sup>

Nor was the ICU any better off. It, too, was riven by competing factions. In Natal, Champion had broken away with his followers to form the ICU *yase* Natal, which deprived the central organisation under the leadership of Clements Kadalie of much-needed income. Not that the ICU *yase* Natal was much better off; its activities were also hampered by a lack of funds and political infighting.<sup>133</sup>

Indian politics in the Union during the depression years was similarly afflicted with the disease of factionalism; the community was divided over the approaches that should be taken to combat the ever-increasing levels of anti-Asiatic sentiment throughout the country.<sup>134</sup> Anti-Asiatic sentiment was almost at fever pitch during the depression years, as whites believed it to be their right to elbow anyone else, but especially Indians, out of "their" jobs and so used naked racism to justify the unjustifiable.<sup>135</sup> The government through its "civilised labour" policy naturally supported the full employment of whites at the expense of others and had tabled highly discriminatory legislation to halt so-called Indian penetration and competition.<sup>136</sup> Calpin argues that these issues, although they did affect Natal, were really aimed at the Indian community in the Transvaal. Very little significant political activity took place in the Natal Indian community during the depression years, especially while the Feetham Commission was in the process of collecting evidence about so-called Asiatic penetration.<sup>137</sup>

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132. See A G Copley, *Class and Consciousness: The Black petty Bourgeoisie in South Africa, 1924-1950*, Greenwood, New York, 1990, pp. 82 - 84.

133. P Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa*, A D Donker, Johannesburg, (reprint) 1987, pp. 214 - 216.

134. U Mesthrie, "The Cape Town Agreement and its effect on Natal Indian Politics, 1927 to 1934", Paper given at Workshop on Natal History, University of Natal, Durban, July 1985.

135. B Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban, 1910-1990*, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1995, p. 49.

136. See G H Calpin, *Indians in South Africa*, Shuter and Shooter, Pietermaritzburg, 1949, pp. 84 - 87.

137. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

It is not yet possible to reflect in a meaningful way upon the totality of the experience of all South Africans during the "years of red dust"; much historical work remains to be done before the early years of the thirties can be seen in their complete and complex context, before they become truly accessible and comprehensible to the modern reader. Even before this is done, however, it is possible to state that the phenomenon that South Africans experienced as the "Great Depression" did leave an almost indelible mark on the people. The garden province of Natal did not escape the blight.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE INDUSTRIES OF NATAL DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Secondary industry in Natal formed an important part of the economic activity in the province, both in terms of its output and the employment it offered. It is beyond the scope of this work to analyse the entire history of secondary industry in Natal prior to the depression of 1929-1933, but as the effects of that economic downturn cannot be fully appreciated without some idea of the pre-existing state of secondary industry in the region, a brief overview is necessary.

Smith began his analysis of industry in Natal by pointing out that:

In most "new" or colonial countries, secondary industry is usually the last type of industry to develop. This is because in its early stages of development, the colony usually relies on its mother country to provide its manufacturing requirements. Early economic activities are directed towards the handling of incoming supplies and their exchange for the primary products of the indigenous inhabitants. As the settlement extends, the production of food becomes more important and so farming and perhaps fishing also develop alongside trade. Only once these basic needs have been met, can secondary industry develop.<sup>1</sup>

Smith further argued that the first secondary industries to develop are usually those industries associated with the processing of basic foodstuffs: flour mills, bakeries and the like. The construction industry and industries supplying the basic requirements of settled life like furniture, soap and candles, then also develop, as do industries associated with the provision of transport requirements. Natal was no different in this regard.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to 1900, however, almost all industry in Natal made relatively slow progress. The reasons for this are quite simple: a shortage of capital and an undeveloped

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1. Smith, "Labour Resources", pp. 529 - 530.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 530.

infrastructure had hampered growth. These deficiencies had dictated that what little growth did take place, occurred along narrow lines; food and the processing thereof (sugar, especially), coal-mining, shipping and allied service industries constituted the major industrial activities of the colony of Natal.<sup>3</sup> The discovery of minerals in the interior and the subsequent creation of new markets, however, radically altered this situation, stimulating the growth of the infrastructure, particularly the railway network and the harbour.<sup>4</sup> The latter assumed cardinal importance as the gateway to the rest of the colony and indeed, to the whole of the sub-continent. Without detailing the great developments that took place in Durban harbour in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,<sup>5</sup> it can be stated that by 1910, Durban had established itself as the premier port of the Union of South Africa, handling a greater percentage of seaborne traffic than all the other ports of the country combined.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the expansion of the rail network not only to the Witwatersrand, but throughout the province, also had a significant effect on the expansion of various types of industry.

The fact that the port of Durban was seen as the gateway to the lucrative market of the Witwatersrand (and to many other markets such as the Natal hinterland, Orange Free State, Basutoland [Lesotho] and parts of Transkei) meant that the town of Durban became the logical place for the development of industries dependent on imported raw materials or semi-processed materials. This accounts for the high concentration of industries such as the chemical industry (particularly paints, fertilizers, crude oil refining, soaps and edible oils), textile and clothing industry, and other miscellaneous industries such as tea blending and packaging, printing and stationery in the Durban region. The development of industries involved in the processing of local raw materials, especially sugar and wattle, was also a logical

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3. C Ballard, "Traders, Trekkers and Colonists" in A Duminy and B Guest (eds), *Natal and Zululand from Earliest Times to 1910: A New History*, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1989, pp. 137ff.
  4. B Guest, "The New Economy" in Duminy and Guest (eds), *Natal and Zululand*, pp. 303 - 338.
  5. For this see L Heydenrych, "Port Natal Harbour, c.1850-1897" in B Guest and J Sellers (eds), *Enterprise and Exploitation in a Victorian Colony: Aspects of the Economic and Social History of Colonial Natal*, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1985 and A Lumby and I McLean, "The Economy and Development of the Port of Durban" in Guest and Sellers (eds), *Receded Tides of Empire*.
  6. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 7.

development, given the fact that many of the finished products were exported in a processed or semi-processed form.<sup>7</sup> Geographical location, then, was an important factor in the concentration of industrial development in the greater Durban region.<sup>8</sup>

Other factors determining that greater Durban should be the focus of industrial development in Natal were market-related: according to population, Durban was the third-largest town in the Union and consequently had, as a district, the highest purchasing power in the region; Durban and the Natal South Coast had already become festooned with popular holiday resorts attracting thousands of tourists to the province; and Durban had relatively easy access to abundant supplies of labour. The last factor was a significant one, for the very abundance of the labour depressed wage levels. By the time of the depression, wages for industrial workers in greater Durban were, as they had always been, significantly lower than in the other major centres of the Union.<sup>9</sup> Durban also had in its Asiatic population a ready supply of semi-skilled labour, suited to "process-minding", in the textile and clothing industries in particular.<sup>10</sup>

By 1929/30, some 44 740 workers were engaged in industrial employment in Natal, of which number 26 018, or 58,2 per cent, were to be found in the greater Durban area. In this same period, Natal accounted for 20,49 per cent of all industrial workers in the Union; the workforce of greater Durban alone constituted 11,92 per cent of the total Union industrial workforce.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, using industrial output as a measure, in 1929/30 the greater Durban region accounted for 63 per cent of the total output of the province of Natal.<sup>12</sup>

Industrial activities outside the greater Durban region were largely confined to the processing of agricultural raw materials: sugar mills, wattle bark processing mills,

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7. *Ibid.*

8. By this is meant the districts of Durban, Pinetown and Mobeni. Mobeni only became part of Durban in 1945.

9. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 8.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

11. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 533.

12. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 6.

dairies and bakeries. The manufacture of clay bricks and other construction materials also took place locally as these were difficult and expensive to transport. Essentially, then, industry in the rest of Natal was greatly overshadowed by that of greater Durban and so any investigation of the effects of the Great Depression on secondary industry in Natal is essentially an examination of secondary industry in the greater Durban region.<sup>13</sup>

Before beginning such an investigation, however, it is necessary to take cognisance of a number of government policies which directly impinged on industry in the Union of South Africa in general during this period. The first of these concerns the economic relationship between the Union and Great Britain. Although never really part of the mercantilist system, the British colonies in South Africa had traded almost exclusively with Britain. After Union, this relationship continued and Britain remained the Union's major trading partner.<sup>14</sup> Generally, raw materials were exported and many forms of processed goods, including most machinery, were imported from Britain. This led to a situation where the development of local industry was, to some extent, hampered by the imperial connection. Having been elected on a platform of increasing South Africa's independence from Britain, the Hertzog government continued, with fresh impetus,<sup>15</sup> to pursue policies aimed at stimulating local industry and opening up and broadening trade links with other countries.<sup>16</sup> Hertzog's rallying call "South Africa first", meant that the Union's interests should be placed above those of any other country, including those of Great Britain. It was in this climate that the Union signed a trade agreement with Germany in 1928 that conferred upon that country "most-favoured trading nation" status, on a par (in theory, at least) with Britain.<sup>17</sup> This did not mean that the Union

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13. For a full discussion of this, see D J L McWhirter, *Industry in Greater Durban, Part II*, Natal Town and Regional Planning Reports, Vol. 4, Pietermaritzburg, 1959, pp. 1 - 9.

14. P J Cain and A G Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Crisis and Deconstruction, 1914-1990*, Longman, London, 1993, pp. 127 - 128.

15. Berger makes the point that such policies had been initiated earlier. He therefore suggests that the Tariff Act of 1925 did not represent a major departure in government policy. See D L Berger, "White Poverty and Government Policy in South Africa: 1892-1934", Ph.D. thesis, Temple University, 1983, pp. 339ff.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

17. Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 48.



had abandoned Britain or her empire as trading partners. On the contrary, the Union appeared to wish to continue trading within the empire and to make use of the system of imperial preference which held considerable benefits for the Union.<sup>18</sup> During the depths of the depression, in fact, the Union participated in the firmer establishment of the system by signing the Ottawa Agreements of 1932,<sup>19</sup> which gave the countries of the Commonwealth greater preferential treatment<sup>20</sup> once mutual tariff concessions had been made.<sup>21</sup> It appears then that the Hertzog government wanted to combine some degree of "free trade" with the economic benefits that the empire could confer. This rather contradictory position helps to explain the measures the government took to protect local industry and perhaps explains why more in this direction was not attempted during the depression years.

Secondly, the policy of industrial protection through the imposition of protective tariffs was greatly extended by the Hertzog government soon after it came to power for the first time in 1924.<sup>22</sup> The measures taken were designed to foster industrial growth in the Union and reduce dependence on foreign manufactured goods. According to Archer:

The key instrument of policy in the inter-war years was the tariff. It was a schedule of taxes, in the form of customs duties levied on imported commodities, aimed at shielding local manufacturers from foreign competition. This process or strategy of industrial development has come to be termed 'import substitution' (sometimes 'import reproduction'), defined for the present purpose in the simple accounting sense as a decrease in the share of imported goods in the total supply to the national market.<sup>23</sup>

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18. Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, pp. 130 - 131.
  19. M Havinden and D Meredith, *Colonialism and Development: Britain and its Tropical Colonies, 1850-1960*, Routledge, London, 1993, p. 187.
  20. R F Holland, *Britain and the Commonwealth Alliance, 1918-39*, MacMillan, London, 1981, pp. 142 - 144.
  21. D Judd and P Slinn, *The Evolution of the Modern Commonwealth, 1902-80*, MacMillan, London, 1982, pp. 68 - 69.
  22. D E Kaplan, "The Politics of Industrial Protection in South Africa", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 3, 1976, p. 76.
  23. S Archer, "Industrial Protection and Employment Creation in South Africa during the Inter-war Years", *South African Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 4, No. 2, September 1989, p. 6.

Tariff measures were intensified and extended during the depression years, affording many key industries protection from overseas competition.<sup>24</sup> In some instances, the government found it expedient to protect industries from the "dumping" of manufactured goods on the local market at prices so low that local manufacturers could never hope to compete.<sup>25</sup> The government passed a series of legislative measures known as the Customs and Tariffs Acts, which had by the end of the depression greatly broadened the number of industries and types of goods protected.<sup>26</sup> In addition, a levy was placed on all imports, the proceeds of which (together with other state contributions) were used to subsidise exports, mainly of agricultural produce.<sup>27</sup> This policy was not entirely successful but did contribute to maintaining employment in parts of the industrial sector to a certain extent.<sup>28</sup> Some industries were, however, not afforded protection and it is not surprising that the depression exacted a higher toll in these industries.<sup>29</sup>

Although the use of tariffs pre-dated the depression, their manipulation became the chief vehicle through which the Hertzog government attempted to assist industry in weathering the crisis. This was because this strategy not only lessened the Union's dependence on imported items (which was a cornerstone of government policy), it was also aimed at maintaining employment in local industry, thus cushioning the economy from the worst effects of the depression. In this respect, Hertzog's policy was akin to the autarky policies followed both by Mussolini in Italy and later by Hitler in Germany. The government's policy of "South Africa first" was clearly a policy of self-sufficiency and protectionism.

The third policy was closely allied with the protectionist policy and also had its origins in the Hertzog government's first term of office. This was the "civilised labour" policy. "Civilised labour" was defined as:

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24. A B Lumby, "The Customs Tariff and the Development of Secondary Industry in South Africa, 1924 - 1939", Ph.D. thesis, University of Natal (Durban), 1975, pp. 78 - 94.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

26. For a full discussion of these measures, see Lumby, "Customs Tariff", pp. 78ff.

27. The Export Subsidies Act, No. 49 of 1931.

28. Kaplan, "Industrial Protection", p. 87.

29. Lumby, "Customs Tariff", p. 83.

...the labour rendered by persons whose standard of living conforms to the standard generally recognised as tolerable from the European standpoint. Uncivilised labour is to be regarded as the labour rendered by persons whose aim is restricted to the bare requirements of the necessities of life as understood among barbarous and undeveloped peoples.<sup>30</sup>

This policy envisaged the promotion of white employment throughout the economy and was largely the result of the influx of rural Afrikaners (many of whom could be classified as "poor whites") into the urban areas. These people were largely unskilled or had no skills suitable for the urban job market, so by entering this market they found themselves in direct competition with Africans for unskilled work, usually involving manual labour.<sup>31</sup> This was considered to be an unacceptable state of affairs as these people could soon become disaffected.<sup>32</sup> They possessed the vote and could thus influence government policy through the ballot box.<sup>33</sup> The "danger" was also perceived, according to Lacey, that such disaffected whites could ally themselves with the black proletariat.<sup>34</sup>

Hence the Hertzog government felt the necessity for a general policy which promoted white employment at the expense of black workers. The policy was first implemented through government departments and parastatals, the South African Railways (SAR) being the most notable. Salmon showed that the proportion of white unskilled employment on the SAR rose from 9,5 per cent in 1924 to 39,3 per cent in 1933, while the proportion of Africans employed declined from 75 per cent to 48,9 per cent in the respective years.<sup>35</sup> The policy was expected to filter down to provincial and even municipal levels, where the government undertook to reimburse municipalities for the extra expense incurred by employing more expensive white

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30. Circular No. 5 emanating from the Prime Minister's Office dated 31 October 1924. Quoted in W K Hancock, *Survey of Commonwealth Affairs*, Vol. II, Part II, Oxford, 1942, p. 48.

31. MacMillan, *Complex South Africa*, p. 131.

32. Many poor whites considered manual labour to be beneath them and there was a consequent resistance to this type of work. See Chapter Eight.

33. Lacey, *Boroko*, p. 232.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

35. L Salmon, "The Economic Background to the revival of Afrikaner Nationalism" in J Butler (ed.), *Boston University Papers in African History*, Vol. 1, Boston, 1964, p. 234.

labour instead of cheaper black labour.<sup>36</sup>

The private sector of the economy was initially hesitant to implement the policy as it would inevitably entail greater expense on labour which, especially during the depression, it was unwilling to incur. The government, however, had equipped itself with "persuasive" powers to encourage the adoption of this policy. It could discriminate in favour of those enterprises maintaining a satisfactory level of "civilised labour" when awarding government contracts.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, manipulation of the tariff could also ensure "satisfactory labour conditions", this was made possible by the differentiated rates system, where the government could choose to implement either a maximum or minimum rate of the tariff. The government could remit duties, wholly or in part; and it could implement or suspend duties by proclamation.<sup>38</sup> It could even prohibit or restrict the supply of raw materials to any factory which maintained "unsatisfactory" labour ratios,<sup>39</sup> although there is no evidence to suggest that this power was ever utilised. Lacey suggested that employers became co-operative when it was realised that the aim of the "civilised labour" policy was as much to abase the rising tide of wealthy Africans as it was to uplift the poor whites:

The iron law of South Africa's 'civilised labour' policy was not the upliftment of 300 000 or so indigent Whites, but rather the super-exploitation of 80% of the workforce, who happened to be Africans. What alarmed the State in the 1920s and 1930s was not poor Whites, but that a fraction of the African labour force had risen above this group of Whites and were even becoming wealthy.<sup>40</sup>

The bitter pill of having to pay higher wages for white labour would therefore be sweetened in a two-fold manner: firstly, the government would indirectly reimburse

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36. *Ibid.* This was the vehicle through which the government operated when subsidising relief works for the unemployed. See below, p.

37. S T van der Horst, *Native Labour in South Africa*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1942, p. 252.

38. Archer, "Industrial Protection", p. 13.

39. Salmon, "Economic Background", p. 234; Archer, "Industrial Protection", pp. 13 - 14.

40. Lacey, *Boroko*, p. 243.

employers through subsidies and protective tariffs and secondly, black labour would stay ultra-cheap.<sup>41</sup> Opinion on the exact nature of the interrelationship between the policies appears divided: Horwitz argued that the tariff policies of the Hertzog government were primarily designed to ensure the implementation of the "civilised labour" policy in the private sector of the economy,<sup>42</sup> while Kaplan argued that the primary aim was to influence the development of industry in the Union, and only secondly to further white employment.<sup>43</sup> Whatever the merits of the arguments, it is clear that the policies did have a significant effect on the economy during the depression years.

Another measure which influenced the economic life of the Union during the depression was the Wage Act, first passed in 1925 and amended in 1930.<sup>44</sup> Wage determinations made under this act were meant to prevent gross exploitation. In most cases, determinations raised the wages of both black and white workers, thus cutting into the profit margins of employers. This often produced a negative backlash, as employers reduced staff, which aggravated unemployment.<sup>45</sup> These determinations discriminated against blacks by fixing their wages at lower levels than those of white workers. Many commercial and industrial undertakings were subject to wage determinations, but such determinations were often opposed by the very people they were meant to assist — the workers.<sup>46</sup>

This apparent paradox may be partly explained by the influence of the Labour Party in the Pact government, which appeared to be determined not to allow employers to take advantage of the unemployment caused by the depression to exploit workers. Senator Boydell, a prominent Labour Party leader and cabinet minister, was reputed to have said "...it is better to die of starvation out of employment than in employment."<sup>47</sup> Unfortunately, when wage determinations pushed the wages of

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41. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

42. R Horwitz, *The Political Economy of South Africa*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1967, p. 245.

43. Kaplan, "Industrial Protection", p. 87.

44. Act 27 of 1925, as amended by Act 23 of 1930.

45. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of A Z Mazingi at Durban on 2 April 1931, at p. 6337.

46. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of A Z Mazingi at Durban, 2 April 1931, at p. 6339; See also *Natal Mercury*, 27 October 1930.

workers up, employers who found they were unable to pay increased wages to all affected employees, simply retrenched some staff and paid remaining workers the higher wage. For this reason then, wage determinations were generally unpopular with the workers they were designed to assist.

The Industrial Conciliation Act,<sup>48</sup> meant as a legislative device to facilitate the solution of industrial disputes, tended to discriminate against African workers for their wages could be fixed by white trade union officials and employers, without involving African workers in the negotiating process at all.<sup>49</sup> There is some evidence of collusion between such trade union officials and white employers, which enabled white workers to retain their privileged positions, for the most part, even in the darkest days of the depression.<sup>50</sup>

The gold standard policy of the Hertzog government also deserves consideration. When Great Britain abandoned the gold standard in September 1931, the Union government chose not to follow suit. This resulted in the appreciation of the South African pound against sterling and all other currencies of countries which had abandoned gold, thus making South African exports more expensive on the world market. Admittedly, this policy also made imported goods, including many of the raw materials used by secondary industry, cheaper. As many of the articles manufactured by secondary industry in Natal were for domestic consumption, this only affected such industries to their benefit, by lowering input costs and thus increasing their profit margins. As the full effects of the depression struck Natal, those industries which did rely, to a greater or lesser extent, upon the export market, began to become voluble in their opposition to the government's policy. The protests of secondary industry in Natal, with few exceptions,<sup>51</sup> were however

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47. See *Natal Witness*, 20 October 1930.

48. Act No. 11 of 1924, as amended by Act 24 of 1930.

49. Section 9 (4). The act defined "worker" as workers of white or "coloured" origin, thus making it easy to discriminate against Africans.

50. Lacey, *Boroko*, p. 234.

51. Some of the members of Durban's "Parliament of Commerce", the Chamber of Commerce, were quite outspoken in this regard, but do not appear to have represented the majority. Official minutes of annual general meetings of the Chamber contain relatively few examples of dissent until relatively late in the depression.

strangely muted, possibly because the government had offset the negative effects of its policy with tariff and other protection. The Durban Chamber of Commerce, for example, prided itself on being a "...non-political parliament of commerce, indirectly but vitally influencing the course and shape of legislation bearing upon the widespread interests of commerce".<sup>52</sup> It was not able to influence the government's decision on the gold standard and, despite the opposition from many quarters, the government persisted until December 1932, before leaving the gold standard. It is extremely difficult to measure the impact of this policy on secondary industry in Natal but what can be said is that those industries which depended either wholly or in part on the export trade, must have suffered substantial losses during the years 1931/32.

Government policies and legislation, both prior to and during the depression, had a profound and far-reaching effect on the industrial sector of the economy. These policies helped to shape the fortunes of commerce and industry in Natal during the depression years.

One of the economy measures instituted by the government during the depression years was the decision to halt all census-taking during the economic crisis and as a consequence, no information on the state of Natal's industries is available for certain of the critical depression years. In certain industries, the dearth of general information has also complicated research. However, enough information exists to attempt an analysis of the effects of the depression. To complicate matters, the census-takers only enumerated those concerns which either employed machinery in their operations, or more than four workers, so the smaller concerns generally escaped notice. For the sake of convenience and clarity, the various sectors of industrial activity will be dealt with separately, as far as possible, before an overview is attempted.

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52. Annual Report of the President of the Durban Chamber of Commerce, Mr T Eriksen, 22 March 1929, p. 3.

### Raw Materials<sup>53</sup>

This industry includes all those establishments processing agricultural products such as wattle bark, cotton, wool, seeds and the like. The industry experienced a period of growth during the early decades of this century and even the depression did not have a marked affect on employment, the number of workers rising from a total of 239 workers in 1916/17 to 754 in 1932/33. This does not mean that the depression passed entirely unnoticed for a number of the smaller concerns were forced to close or amalgamate with others, so that by the end of the depression, the number of concerns had fallen but those which survived had become larger. By 1936 (the year of the first census following the depression) the industry had more or less regained the position of 1929. Interestingly, by 1936/37, almost three-quarters of the industry was located in the greater Durban area, the concerns in the outlying regions having closed during the depression.<sup>54</sup>

### Stone and Clay Industry

This category included firms that manufactured bricks and tiles, worked in marble, glass, asbestos and asphalt for road surfacing and the like. Due to the high cost of transport of what are bulky yet relatively cheap products, and often also to the availability of suitable raw materials locally, these industries were spread far more evenly throughout the whole of Natal. Only 50 per cent of them were concentrated in the greater Durban area. One of the largest concerns was situated in the greater Durban area, being the Coronation Brick and Tile Company, which in 1927 employed over 1 000 persons and produced an average of 4,5 million bricks and 350 000 tiles per month, making it the largest concern of its type in the southern hemisphere.<sup>55</sup> This industry was directly linked to the fortunes of the building industry as a whole, for it supplied essential building materials to construction firms throughout the province. The building industry was, as is usual, especially sensitive to economic conditions and building activity declined markedly during the depression years, causing unemployment.<sup>56</sup>

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53. While it seems strange for "Raw Materials" to be considered a sector of industry, this categorisation was employed by the census-takers. Smith has used the categorisation to include those industries specified.

54. Smith, "Labour Resources", pp. 536 - 540.

55. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 117.

56. Ravenscroft, "Depression", p. 40.



The fall in employment in the stone and clay industry was even greater. In 1925/26, some 2 524 workers were employed but in 1932/33, this figure had dropped to 1 153, a decline of 54 per cent. Although the industry did not require tariff protection, it is possible to deduce that the "civilised labour" policy did operate to a certain extent in this industry, for the retrenchments that took place were not evenly spread across the racial categories: 32,6 per cent of white workers were retrenched, 63,3 per cent of Indian workers and 55,8 per cent of African workers. The "coloured" workforce was comparatively small (only 16 workers) and remained relatively stable.<sup>57</sup> Earnings of workers in this industry were also affected by the depression, falling on average by 55 per cent although, again, this was not evenly distributed: white wages fell by 43 per cent and those of Africans by 66,5 per cent, while the other racial categories more or less maintained their positions.<sup>58</sup> It appears that employers in this sector economised on the wages of both the highest and lowest paid workers during the depression; the wages of African employees were amongst the lowest in any industry in Natal.<sup>59</sup>

**The Building Industry**

As has already been pointed out, the building industry was, and still is, extremely vulnerable to cyclical fluctuations in the trade and business cycle. This may be seen in just one example: in greater Durban, the building industry had been experiencing a minor boom period in the years immediately prior to the depression, which made the difficulties of the depression years appear all the more severe. Table 3.1 illustrates this:

**Table 3.1**  
**Value of Building Plans passed in Durban, 1928/29 to 1933/34**  
**(Excluding Municipal and Government Buildings)**

Year	Value (£)
1928/29	972 955
1929/30	972 408
1930/31	654 854
1931/32	646 909
1932/33	373 002
1933/34	735 801

**Source:** 78th Annual Report of the Durban Chamber of Commerce, p. 151.

It must be pointed out that the passing of plans did not necessarily mean that construction was undertaken immediately, for the fall in employment in the building industry only ceased in 1933. At this point, 40 per cent of all workers in the industry in greater Durban in 1929 had been retrenched, the highest proportion of the workforce in this industry in the entire Union.<sup>60</sup> The income of the industry fell by 66 per cent in greater Durban, again the highest fall in the Union. Individual wages of those still in employment, however, were well maintained during the depression years.<sup>61</sup>

The picture for the whole of Natal is somewhat different, for employment fell from a peak of 3 760 in 1925/26, to a low of only 1 443 in 1932/33.<sup>62</sup> Falls in employment were severe, with only the small "coloured" contingent of the labour force actually improving its position. White employment declined by 48 per cent, that of Indians by 63,8 per cent and that of Africans by a massive 70 per cent.<sup>63</sup> Average African wages were more or less maintained, while those of Indians declined nominally, by 4,7 per cent. Average white earnings fell by 21,7 per cent, while those of "coloureds" declined by 73,5 per cent. So while numerically this component of the workforce had improved its position, their average income declined markedly, to only slightly above that of Africans.<sup>64</sup>

There is some evidence that the policies of the government impinged directly on this industry, for although it received no tariff protection and was only indirectly affected by the gold standard policy, the operation of the "civilised labour" policy

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57. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 541.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 544.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 546.

60. Ravenscroft, "Depression", p. 40.

61. *Ibid.*

62. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 640.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*, p. 642.

can clearly be seen. However, it must be noted that most employment in the building trade is seasonal and increases and decreases in employment directly coincide with the demand for construction. Employers would, therefore, only retain the services of unskilled labour when there was a distinct need for them. That this need declined cannot be disputed, but it is unlikely that the "civilised labour" policy was responsible for all the retrenchments that occurred.

### **Metal and Engineering Industries**

There was a great variety of concerns which were classified in this category. They ranged from firms which made iron cooking pots, to boilermakers, shipbuilders, makers of metal trunks and tin cans, sheetmetal works, general machine maintenance and repairs, foundries, locksmiths, gunsmiths and plumbing works.<sup>65</sup> The engineering industry, which was largely dependent on repair and maintenance work for other industries, soon felt the effects of the depression, as such repairs and maintenance were either done "in-house", or reduced to the absolute minimum. This was especially noticeable in the sugar industry, where replacements and routine maintenance at sugar mills were curtailed due to the adverse economic climate and the prevailing unfavourable sugar price.<sup>66</sup> The downturn in the building trade also affected the engineering sector, as structural work diminished.

The government's adherence to the gold standard also played a role, as repairs to shipping, which had formed a significant part of this sector's activities, were transferred overseas in the latter part of 1931 and 1932 because of the unfavourable rate of exchange. This was unfortunate because the local industry had only just begun to recover in the latter half of the 1920s from intense foreign competition in this sector.<sup>67</sup> When the Union abandoned the gold standard in December 1932, and the unfavourable exchange rate disappeared, the industry began to show signs of recovery and expected to regain lost ship-repair business.<sup>68</sup>

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65. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 554; Katzen, *Industry*, pp. 57 - 63.

66. Union of South Africa, *Annual Reports of the Chief Inspector of Factories*, U.G. 25 of 1932, p. 5 and U.G. 37 of 1933, p. 15.

67. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 62.

68. *Industrial and Commercial South Africa*, February 1933.

The gross output of the metal and engineering industries declined by 37 per cent, from £936 000 in 1929/30 to a low of £594 000 in 1932/33. It was not until 1934/35 that the output for 1929/30 was exceeded.<sup>69</sup> According to Ravenscroft, employment in these industries fell by some 34 per cent and group income declined by a massive 55 per cent,<sup>70</sup> but Katzen puts the decline at 20 per cent<sup>71</sup> and Smith at only 15,3 per cent,<sup>72</sup> a stark reminder of the unreliability of statistics for this period.<sup>73</sup> The retrenchment of workers was not evenly spread across racial categories: in greater Durban, the African component was reduced from 41 per cent to 35 per cent between 1929/30 and 1932/33, while the positions of white and "coloured" employees remained relatively stable.<sup>74</sup> In Natal as a whole, the position was somewhat different, with white employment falling by 14,3 per cent, "coloured" by 22,9 per cent and African by 18,8 per cent. Indian employment suffered the least reduction, namely 3,8 per cent.<sup>75</sup> It appears that the areas outside of greater Durban experienced more unemployment in this sector but no direct evidence of this can be found.

Taken as a whole, it can be seen that the economic downturn did have profound consequences for these industries. Once the worst of the depression had passed and the Union left the gold standard, however, confidence returned and the industries experienced a period of considerable growth, which was further stimulated by the advent of the Second World War.<sup>76</sup>

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69. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 62.

70. Ravenscroft, "Depression", pp. 40 - 41.

71. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 62.

72. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 553.

73. Although not explicitly stated, it appears that both Katzen and Ravenscroft only use figures for greater Durban, while Smith is dealing with the entire province. There are still unexplained discrepancies between the two former sources.

74. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 177.

75. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 553.

76. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 63.

## The Clothing and Textile Industries

Under this category were included the manufacturers of clothing, tailors, dry cleaners and laundries, blanket makers, textile manufacturers, and those firms making ropes, bags, sacks and tarpaulins.<sup>77</sup> The larger industries were located almost entirely in the greater Durban region in the 1920s and 1930s; this region accounting for some 95 per cent of all employment by 1936.<sup>78</sup>

The clothing industry in Natal had been slow to develop, as most clothing was imported.<sup>79</sup> What little was made, was usually in the cheaper range, particularly cheap men's wear. Working conditions were poor but, surprisingly, wages for white and "coloured" women, who formed the backbone of the industry, were higher than in other areas of the Union and the working week had been fixed at 45 hours, compared to other areas, where as many as 50 hours were worked.<sup>80</sup> The wages of Indian workers, however, were amongst the lowest in the industry in the Union, and piece-work was common. Piece-work was extremely exploitative, as a test case (*Rex vs Cohen*, 1933) had laid down the principle that no minimum wage could be fixed by law for this type of work. A reduction in the level of earnings of employees who had been forced by "economic pressure" to accept the piece-work rates set by the employers was evident.<sup>81</sup> It appears that it was a result of their exploitability that the employment of Indians was advanced during the depression and in the years immediately after it. The Natal Garment Workers' Union was formed in 1934 to combat this exploitation.

In contrast to many other industries, the clothing industry only felt the cutting edge of the depression after 1930. Unemployment in the industry was rife during the following three years but, after 1933, the industry experienced a period of rapid growth.

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77. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 570.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 574.

79. Unfortunately, statistics relating to such imports in the twentieth century could not be found.

80. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 34.

81. Union of South Africa, *Annual Report of the Department of Labour, 1933*, U.G. 11 of 1936, p. 78.

The fortunes of the textile industry differ only in that the industry enjoyed a reasonable measure of government protection after 1925.<sup>82</sup> The manufacture of blankets, shawls, rugs and "kaffir" sheeting had a very long history in the Union of South Africa, as that sector of secondary industry was one of the first to develop.<sup>83</sup> The efforts of entrepreneurs in this sector in Natal, however, were shortlived and it was not until 1925, when the government imposed virtually prohibitive duties on imported cotton blankets and "shoddy",<sup>84</sup> that the local industry was stimulated. The object of the government had been to force producers to make use of South African wool in their products:

...to promote the interests of the Union as a wool-producing country by protecting the industry existing at the time which produced woollen blankets, and as a consequence to foster the use of woollen in preference to cotton articles among all classes of the population.<sup>85</sup>

The government failed to attain its objective for merino wool produced in the Union was (at this time) too expensive to be used in the manufacture of blankets for the use of the large African market. What the protection did do was to enable the local industry to manufacture *cotton* blankets at competitive prices. Throughout the later 1920s, enterprises manufacturing all types of cotton goods sprang into existence in the greater Durban area. Even during the depression, this industry continued to show signs of growth, as locally produced articles began to take a larger and larger share of the local trade in cotton blankets, chiefly intended for the "native trade". Greater Durban was particularly suited to this industry, given the proximity of large markets in Zululand and elsewhere, and the fact that the raw materials were almost entirely imported. Furthermore, the abundance of cheap labour in the region was a great advantage, as the industry was labour-intensive.<sup>86</sup> By 1933, once the Union

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82. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 572.

83. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 47.

84. The new tariff involved duties ranging from 197½ per cent to 312 per cent. See Katzen, *Industry*, p. 49.

85. Union of South Africa, *Board of Trade and Industries, Report No. 290: The South African Blanket Manufacturing Industry*, Pretoria, 1946, p. 2.

86. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 50.

had abandoned the gold standard and the doom-laden atmosphere of the depression had given way to increased business confidence, the industry had made considerable progress and had captured about 80 per cent of the Union market for all types of blankets, rugs and "kaffir" sheeting,<sup>87</sup> and factories were reported to be working at full capacity.<sup>88</sup>

The sector of the textile industry concerned with the manufacture of ropes and matting was represented in Durban by a factory established in 1918. Durban was an ideal location as a humid climate was essential to the production of a quality product and, before raw materials were produced locally they were imported, chiefly from India, East Africa and the Philippines. Durban supplied the needs of most of the Union and even exported surplus both deeper into Africa and overseas. Competition was keen, especially from India, the United States and Canada but by 1928 the factory was being run day and night to keep pace with demand. This sector did suffer slightly during the depression, especially from the unfavourable exchange rate during the gold standard crisis.<sup>89</sup> However, due to the cessation of industrial censuses and the grouping of this industry with others in this sector in statistical returns, a more detailed exposition is impossible.

Taken together, the clothing and textile industries did not suffer greatly during the depression and, although there was some measure of unemployment, the overall employment trend in the industries was upwards. How much of this can be attributed to the measure of tariff protection the industries enjoyed, is difficult to determine. Total employment in these industries rose from 1 290 in 1925/26 to 2 856 in 1932/33, or by 121 per cent, but increases in employment were not equally spread across racial categories. White employment rose by only 63 per cent, while that of Africans rose by 98 per cent, "coloureds" by 121 per cent and Indians by a massive 245 per cent.<sup>90</sup> Indian workers were mostly male and their employment was perhaps due to their exploitability under the piecework system. This may be clearly seen when the wage structures of the various groups is compared: although

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87. Union of South Africa, *Board of Trade and Industries, Report No. 290*, p. 13.

88. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 50.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

90. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 571.

total earnings in these industries fell by 17,7 per cent between 1925/26 and 1932/33, the average wage of Indian workers fell by 21,6 per cent, compared to only 6,5 per cent for Africans and 6,2 per cent for white workers.<sup>91</sup> By 1936/37, Indians constituted 48 per cent of the total workforce in these industries.<sup>92</sup>

### Footwear and Leather Industry

The footwear and leather industry, in contrast to most of the other secondary industries in Natal, was not centred on greater Durban. Proximity to the wattle plantations of the Natal midlands made Pietermaritzburg the natural seat of this industry, for a tannery had been established there as early as 1862. Pietermaritzburg was also on the route used by the transport riders to the two Boer Republics before the advent of the railway network and was thus an appropriate place for harness-making and saddlery.<sup>93</sup> Establishments offering boot- and shoe-repairs were to be found in most of the towns of Natal but were generally small cobblers' works and may not have been enumerated under the industrial census. There were, however, 19 such establishments that were included in the census of 1936/37.<sup>94</sup>

By the time of the depression, there were only two shoe factories of note; the Eddels Company of Pietermaritzburg and Greatrex and Company of Durban (both specialising in men's footwear) but there were 18 smaller establishments in the leather and footwear industry in the greater Durban area alone.<sup>95</sup> The period immediately prior to the depression had not been without difficulties, as local footwear manufacturers had faced strong competition from imported footwear, mainly from Czechoslovakia and Japan. Such footwear was sold at prices with which the local manufacturers could not compete. The entire industry of the Union was under threat from these cheap imports and agitation resulted in the imposition of a protective tariff of 30 per cent in 1930.<sup>96</sup>

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91. *Ibid.*, p. 573.

92. *Ibid.*, p. 572.

93. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 43.

94. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 632.

95. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 169.

96. Lumby, "Customs Tariff", pp. 82, 89.



Although somewhat sheltered by this tariff, the industry nevertheless experienced difficulties during the depression, as declining demand resulted in retrenchments and short time in most establishments between January 1931 and September 1932. Gross output, however, recovered quickly after this and by the following year output was 25 per cent higher than in 1929/30 in the greater Durban area. Contributing to the relative success of the footwear industry was not only the protective tariff, but the fact that the hides used by the industry had fallen in price due to market saturation.<sup>97</sup>

The "civilised labour" policy appears to have operated with a great deal of success in this industry in the greater Durban area. Between the years 1929/30 and 1932/33, the number of white workers in employment rose by 103 per cent, while all other groups declined; the Indian component of the workforce was reduced by 19 per cent, the African by 21 per cent, and the "coloured" by 18 per cent.<sup>98</sup> It cannot be deemed merely coincidental that this should have occurred during the depression years. Comparative figures for the whole of Natal also indicate the dominant position of white workers. In 1932/33, 46 per cent of all workers in this industry in Natal were white, 24 per cent Indian, 10 per cent "coloured" and 20 per cent African.<sup>99</sup> It must be pointed out that the average wage of the white worker (because of the high number of women employed) was on a downward curve even prior to the depression, and they continued to fall during the depression. It appears that employers in this sector were employing more women in an effort to cut costs.<sup>100</sup>

### **The Paper and Printing Industry**

Included in this category were printers, engravers and lithographers, and manufacturers of paper bags. The printing industry, the most important of these,

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97. Edley, "Population", p. 26.

98. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 169.

99. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 632.

100. *Ibid.*

had a long history in the province, with newspapers such *The Natal Witness*, *The Natal Mercury*, and *The Natal Advertiser (Daily News)* all having been established in the nineteenth century. The first predominantly Zulu newspaper, *Ilanga lase Natal*, appeared in 1903. Smaller newspapers also operated in many of the smaller towns of Natal. Most newsprint and other paper was imported. Other printing works were also established to print letterheads, price lists, catalogues and the like. Although relatively small in comparison to other industries, the printing industry was well established by the time of the depression.<sup>101</sup> This industry was also centred in the greater Durban area; all but 312 persons employed in the industry in 1932/33 were to be found in this area of the province.<sup>102</sup>

Conditions in the industry during the First World War were very good, as the isolation of the Union had forced Natal companies to make use of local printers, and also because of the increase in the number of items that were packaged in printed cardboard containers. After the war, however, fierce overseas competition returned and the local industry went into something of a decline. The Hertzog government responded by affording the local South African printing industry a measure of tariff protection ranging from 30 per cent upwards on "printed, ruled, lithographed and embossed matter".<sup>103</sup> This measure had the effect of stimulating the local industry and new concerns were established in the later 1920s. All was not well in the local industry, however, as the Natal branch of the South African Typographical Union, to which virtually all printing-industry workers belonged, had made wage demands which had to be met. This had the effect of increasing costs, resulting in a decrease in orders.<sup>104</sup>

On the outbreak of the depression, the industry in the greater Durban area alone employed some 1 095 persons, while the gross output was some £601 000.<sup>105</sup> The industry was naturally dependent on commerce and trade for much of its business

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101. Katzen, *Industry*, pp. 104 - 105.

102. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 583; Katzen, *Industry*, p. 106.

103. Union of South Africa, *Board of Trade and Industries Report No. 353 : The Printing Industry*, 23 June 1955, p. 30.

104. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 106.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

and so the general slump in these activities meant that orders declined and the gross output of the industry in greater Durban in 1932/33 fell to only £505 000.<sup>106</sup> As a consequence, workers had to be retrenched. In 1932/33, 1 067 workers were employed in the industry in greater Durban,<sup>107</sup> while 1 379 were employed in the whole province.<sup>108</sup> Although these official figures show that employment in this industry had not suffered drastically during the depression, smaller concerns did feel the depression quite keenly, for in 1932 there were reputed to be 175 unemployed persons formerly associated with the printing industry in Durban alone.<sup>109</sup> It appears that many of the larger concerns felt obliged to retain the services of skilled and semi-skilled Indian employees during the depression for fear that dismissed workers would go into business for themselves and provide competition.<sup>110</sup> Interestingly, most Indians engaged in the printing industry were members of the South African Typographical Union, which had become multiracial in 1929<sup>111</sup> and, although they formed a minority of all employees in the industry in Natal (some 24 per cent in 1932/33),<sup>112</sup> their skills made white employers wary of retrenching them. Wage determinations, however, forced wages up and some retrenchments of this category of worker were in fact made, resulting as predicted in the establishment of several small Indian-owned printing firms.<sup>113</sup>

The protection afforded this industry had succeeded in promoting white employment as, between 1924/25 and 1932/33, the number of white employees had increased by 17,5 per cent, while that of Indians had actually declined by 1,8 per cent. The employment of Africans, however, had increased by a remarkable 62 per cent.<sup>114</sup> It can be seen, therefore, that if the strategy of the protectionist and "civilised labour" policies was to abase African workers, this strategy had failed in

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106. *Ibid.*

107. *Ibid.*

108. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 583.

109. *Natal Mercury*, 23 April 1932.

110. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 504.

111. *Ibid.*

112. *Ibid.*, p. 584.

113. *Natal Mercury*, 23 April 1932.

114. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 583.

this industry in Natal. Protection had assisted the industry by shielding it from the effects of foreign competition during the crisis.

### The Chemical Industry

Included in this category were a great number of important industries in the Natal economy. Such industries included manufacturers of paint, fertilizers, candles and soap, polish, matches and oil, as well as pharmaceutical concerns. In almost all cases, not only were these industries centred in greater Durban, but they accounted for a very significant proportion of the entire production of such industries in the Union.<sup>115</sup> One such example is the paint industry.

Prior to the depression, Durban had become one of the most important centres of this industry in the Union, with several large concerns having been established in the area. This trend continued well after the depression, so that by 1953 the Board of Trade and Industries could remark that Durban was "...the centre of gravity" as far as the industry was concerned.<sup>116</sup> This was due to the fact that almost all the raw materials for the manufacture of paint were imported, and because the products were extensively used in the shipping trade.<sup>117</sup> The proximity of a large population in the immediate area, and the relative closeness of the Witwatersrand market, also contributed to this industry being located in the greater Durban area.<sup>118</sup>

The paint industry received government protection as early as 1923, when the Smuts government imposed a 25 per cent duty on all imported paint and varnish.<sup>119</sup> This measure forced some overseas manufacturers, who had set up local agencies to distribute their paint, to begin manufacturing paint locally. These included concerns such as Warden and Hotchkiss Ltd (Wardkiss), G C Shave Ltd, Herbert Evans Ltd and Lewis Berger and Sons Ltd.<sup>120</sup> The imposition of the tariff, then, had definite benefits for the local industry.

115. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 71.

116. Union of South Africa, *Board of Trade and Industries Report No. 339: The Paint Manufacturing Industry*, 7 November 1953, p. 5.

117. *Ibid.*

118. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 72.

119. Union of South Africa, *Report of the Board of Trade and Industries, No. 339*, p. 71.

There is little evidence of the effects of the depression on the paint manufacturing industry in Natal, but it would seem reasonable to suppose that the economic downturn in both the shipping trade and the local building industry must have had a negative impact on the industry. This cannot, however, be confirmed by a study of the employment statistics of the industry, as no statistics are available for crucial years. There is considerable evidence, however, to show that some of the end-users of paint, namely painting contractors, did suffer greatly during the depression.<sup>121</sup> An appeal was made by Mr W Skipper, President of the Durban and District Painters' Society, for the public to employ only white painters:

The members of the Durban and District Painters' Society wish to call the attention of the general public [*sic*] to the enormous amount of renovation work that is being done by Indian and Native labour. Our members are no good at pick and shovel or relief work. We ask the public on the Berea and the Beach to give this work back to Europeans. There are 215 first-class craftsmen unemployed at the present time, with no money to buy bread. Think what this may mean to Durban. We have had enough of riots and strikes, we want public sympathy. We only want work and good fellowship.<sup>122</sup>

The only statistical information regarding the paint manufacturing industry in this period shows that in 1929/30, 451 persons were employed in the industry but in 1934/35, (the next year for which there are data available) there were 705 workers. These figures reveal little about the intervening period as, by the latter year, the depression had waned and the industry was experiencing something of a minor boom which greatly boosted employment and output. Gross output had risen from £364 000 in 1929/30 to £607 000 in 1934/35.<sup>123</sup>

Another important sector of the chemical industry was that associated with the manufacture of soap, candles and edible oils. Again, this industry was centred in the

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120. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 73.

121. See as examples: *Natal Mercury*, 20 June 1930; 7 July 1931.

122. *Natal Mercury*, 11 February 1931.

123. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 74.

greater Durban area and employed just over 40 per cent of all the workers engaged in this industry in the Union.<sup>124</sup> The location of the industry was again related to the importation of raw materials. All of the industries in this sector had long been established in Durban by the time of the depression, mainly due to the fact that they had been given considerable tariff protection during the 1920s.<sup>125</sup> Despite this, competition was fierce and local industry faced strong competition from a wide range of other countries during the 1920s.<sup>126</sup> This competition greatly intensified during the depression years, when cheap soap was imported from Japan. As a result, the duty on imported household soap was raised to 10s per 100 lb., while the tariff on toilet soap was increased from 25 per cent to 40 per cent for all imports except those emanating from the United Kingdom.<sup>127</sup> Similarly, protection for the hydrogenated fats industry also originated during the depression,<sup>128</sup> while the edible-oil expressing industry had to wait until 1934.<sup>129</sup>

No data of a comparative nature exist for this sector for the crucial years of the depression but it seems clear, from the amount of protection afforded, that the depression had profoundly negative effects. A similar unsatisfactory situation exists with regard to information concerning the fertilizer and pharmaceutical industries. This is indeed irksome as the fertilizer industry was one of the largest employers in the greater Durban area, one of the biggest concerns being African Explosives and Chemical Industries (AECI) at Umbogintwini. It appears that the industry was not afforded any protection at this time, as keeping agricultural input prices as low as possible was a priority.<sup>130</sup>

Taken as a whole, the chemical industry of Natal suffered severely from the economic downturn of the early 1930s. Employment in the entire industry declined

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124. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

125. See Union of South Africa, *Report of the Board of Trade and Industries No. 338: The Edible Oils, Hydrogenated Fats and Soap Industries of the Union*, 31 October 1953.

126. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 79.

127. Union of South Africa, *Report of the Board of Trade and Industries No. 338*, p. 84.

128. *Ibid.*, pp. 49 - 50.

129. *Ibid.*, pp. 47 - 49.

130. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 87.

from a high of 4 194 in 1916/17 to only 2 260 in 1932/33.<sup>131</sup> In greater Durban, the centre of the industry, employment fell from 2 966 in 1929/30 to a low of 1 841 in 1933/34, a fall of some 38 per cent. The fall in employment was not evenly spread over all racial categories, for white employment declined by 5,7 per cent, while that of Indians declined by 53 per cent, "coloured" employment by 60 per cent and African by 48 per cent.<sup>132</sup> It is obvious then, that in return for the protection offered to the industry by the state, the industry sheltered its white employees from the worst of the depression at the expense of the other components of the workforce. White salaries in the industry were unaffected, but the average wages of white workers did decline by 25 per cent, while those of the other categories fell far more: Indian workers by 50 per cent, "coloured" by 53 per cent and African by 44 per cent.<sup>133</sup> This serves to strengthen the hypothesis that the protection of whites in this industry was a *quid pro quo* for tariff protection.

### **Food, Drink and Tobacco Industry**

This sector of industry was amongst the most important in the Natal economy, employing more than 20 per cent of the industrial workforce in 1929/30.<sup>134</sup> It included bakeries, flour mills, sugar mills, distilleries, breweries and concerns engaged in the manufacture of cheese, butter, condensed milk, aerated waters, "native" beer, bacon, sweets, pickles, jams, jelly powders, ice, vinegar and many more. It also included tobacco factories and tea- and coffee-packing concerns.<sup>135</sup>

The sugar industry as a whole played a vital part in the economic fortunes of Natal, as the growing of sugar-cane was the most important agricultural activity in the province in the 1920s and 1930s. As much of the milling was undertaken by the same people who grew the cane,<sup>136</sup> both aspects are examined in the chapter of this

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131. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 616.

132. Katzen, *Industry*, p.179.

133. Adapted from Katzen, *Industry*, p. 179.

134. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

135. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 562.

136. The so-called millers-cum-planters.

thesis which deals with agriculture.<sup>137</sup> Closely linked to the sugar industry were those concerns which utilised a large proportion of sugar in their products: sweetmakers and the producers of aerated minerals. These industries were to be found both in greater Durban and in the Pietermaritzburg areas. Unfortunately, little evidence of their performance during the depression years can be found.

Next in importance must rank the grain milling and refining industry which also, strange as it may seem, was centred in the greater Durban area. This can be attributed to the fact that the production of wheaten flour was undertaken almost entirely from imported grain, while the milling of maize was undertaken for the large domestic market.<sup>138</sup> Little data exist to document the fortunes of this industry during the depression years, but as it may be supposed that there was a steady demand for their products, even though some may have switched to the cheaper maize product,<sup>139</sup> it seems unlikely that the industry suffered greatly during the depression.

Tea was produced in Natal by J L Hulett on his Kearsney Estate but could not meet the demands of the local market either in quality or quantity. Most tea was imported from Ceylon and Indonesia, reason enough for locating the industry in greater Durban, but in addition the humid climate was a vital component in the blending process. Tea was then distributed both locally in Natal and the Union, while a proportion was also exported to destinations elsewhere in Africa.<sup>140</sup> Sadly, no data exist concerning the fortunes of this industry during the depression.

The manufacture of dairy and related products like infant foods, custard powders and the like was not centred in the greater Durban area, because of the distribution of the dairy herds and the difficulties of transporting milk under Natal's climatic conditions. Over 40 per cent of these industries were to be found in the Stanger, Underberg, Estcourt, Merrievale, Winterton, Ixopo, Donnybrook and Bergville

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137. See below Chapter Five.

138. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 99.

139. No firm evidence of this can be found, but it seems a reasonable supposition that domestic economy was practised to some extent.

140. *Ibid.*, p. 100.



areas of the province, while only 21 per cent were to be found in the greater Durban area.<sup>141</sup> The fortunes of this industry, because of its close links with agriculture, are also dealt with in Chapter Five below.

The fortunes of the Natal tobacco industry were closely tied with those of local tobacco growers. By the time of the depression, tobacco growing had declined significantly in importance and as a consequence, the local industry had dwindled to only three concerns based in the greater Durban area.<sup>142</sup>

Seen as a whole, the food, drink and tobacco industry in Natal did suffer during the depression years, as employment fell from a high of 12 481 in 1925/26 to only 10 800 in 1932/33, or by 13,5 per cent, with the greatest fall being in the case of Indian and "coloured" workers, whose numbers fell by 41,3 per cent and 74 per cent respectively. White employment in this industry actually increased in this period, by some 39 per cent, as did the employment of Africans but by only 1,2 per cent.<sup>143</sup> Taking the greater Durban area alone, a somewhat different picture emerges: the decline in employment was in the order of only 9,7 per cent between 1929/30 and 1933/34. The employment of white workers fell by 2,7 per cent, that of Indians by 6 per cent, and that of Africans by 16,6 per cent, while the employment of "coloured" workers actually increased by 25 per cent.<sup>144</sup> On average, workers' earnings increased during the period 1925/26 and 1932/33, but the wages of white employees declined by an average of 7,6 per cent.<sup>145</sup> In greater Durban, by contrast, while white salaries were hardly affected by the depression, average white wages fell by 38 per cent, those of Africans by 41,5 per cent, Indian wages by 25,9 per cent and those of "coloured" workers by 57,8 per cent between 1929/30 and 1932/33.<sup>146</sup>

Several of the component sectors of this industry did indeed receive government tariff protection, and it is perhaps for this reason that the industry as a whole did not

141. *Ibid.*

142. *Ibid.*, pp. 101 - 102.

143. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 560.

144. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 183.

145. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 564.

146. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 183.

suffer as severely as some others. It is also interesting to note the overall increase in white employment between 1925/26 and 1932/33, due partly to tariff protection. It appears that this sector of the economy in Natal was fairly responsive to the government's call to promote white employment at the expense of other groups; even the sugar mills began to employ more "civilised labour" during the depression under pressure from the government.<sup>147</sup> Several beachfront cafes and hotels also began to employ white waiters in place of Indians.<sup>148</sup> This was welcomed in typical fashion by "Job Hunter" in the *Natal Mercury*:

I think it is a terrible shame that so many Indians are employed when there are so many Europeans out of work who would be very grateful to accept these positions and would work just as well as the Indian, if not better.<sup>149</sup>

*Ilanga lase Natal*, however, was scathing about the replacement of these waiters so "...that poor whites might take the few pounds which are paid for this kind of work". The article continued:

Again we ask did anyone try to find other work for them? To our knowledge not a hand was held out to them, and under the pressure of poverty they have drifted all over Natal seeking work and finding little of it.<sup>150</sup>

The anti-Asiatic feeling expressed by "Job Hunter" was fairly common during this period and was by no means restricted to this industry alone.

### **The Furniture Industry**

Included in this industrial category are not only the manufacturers of furniture but mattress-makers, picture framers and coffin-makers. This sector was one of the smaller of the industries of Natal. The industry was centred in the greater Durban region, which accounted for all but 10 of the 57 concerns in this industry in

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147. See below, p. 135.

148. *Natal Mercury*, 22 April 1931.

149. *Natal Mercury*, 24 April 1931.

150. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 12 June 1931.

1936/37.<sup>151</sup> By far the most important component of the industry was furniture manufacturing, both in terms of gross output and in terms of employment.

The sale of furniture and its production was, and still is, very sensitive to economic fluctuations. The industry in Natal had survived many trying times before the 1920s, whereafter the situation began to improve due to the introduction of sales on hire purchase. Other factors which aided this revival were the manufacture and sale of less durable and cheaper items of furniture, many of which were in increasing demand by Natal's large African population.<sup>152</sup> This revival suffered a setback in the later 1920s but then again surged in the years immediately prior to the depression. By 1929/30, there were 842 persons employed in the industry in the greater Durban area and the gross output amounted to some £251 000.<sup>153</sup>

The depression had a very severe impact on the industry and retrenchments and unemployment were rife, especially in the greater Durban area. In 1932/33, only 395 persons were employed in the industry in this region, a decline of some 53 per cent from the 846 persons employed in 1929/30. All categories of workers were retrenched: the number of white employees fell by 39,5 per cent, the Indian workforce by 61,8 per cent, the "coloured" by 68,4 per cent and the African by 53 per cent.<sup>154</sup> The industry in Natal fared somewhat better than elsewhere in the Union, as the fall in employment for the entire Union was some 56 per cent.<sup>155</sup> The retrenchment of Indian workers had negative consequences for the more well-established companies, as such dismissed workers displayed considerable enterprise and began to set up their own "backyard" factories, producing furniture at prices which undercut the market, much to the chagrin of their former employers<sup>156</sup> and their fellow unemployed white colleagues, who tried through intimidation to close such "factories". Information on these "factories" is unfortunately very sketchy, but

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151. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 599 and Katzen, *Industry*, p. 189.

152. Union of South Africa, *Annual Report of the Department of Labour*, U.G. 31 of 1927, p. 19.

153. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 111.

154. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

155. Ravenscroft, "Depression", p. 40.

156. *Natal Mercury*, 23 June 1932.

they seemed to have posed a real threat to the employment of whites in the entire industry, for the secretary of the Furniture Workers' Union, Mr J C Bolton, led a protest march against their existence through the streets of the town accompanied by 100 union members. The march ended with "visits" to factories staffed or owned by Indians. Their actions were clearly intimidatory.<sup>157</sup> Despite these actions, however, little appears to have been achieved and many furniture workers were forced to accept employment on relief works. Wages for those still in employment also suffered greatly, the average wage falling by 50 per cent. White wages declined by 44 per cent, while all other wages declined by 50 per cent or more. Interestingly, white salaries also declined by 50 per cent between 1929/30 and 1932/33.<sup>158</sup>

The industry was not afforded any tariff protection as most of the materials, especially the various types of wood used, were imported and local manufacturers actually benefited from the stronger currency and the "dumping" of plywood from Europe.<sup>159</sup> Almost all products were sold locally and thus sales were unaffected by the exchange rate.

The industry took some considerable time to recover from the slump of 1931-33 and it was not until as late as 1936/37 that employment in the industry reached pre-depression levels. Gross output had, however, recovered more rapidly and had, by 1935/36, exceeded the 1929/30 level to stand at £305 000.<sup>160</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the limited material available to researchers, it is possible to see that the depression did have far-reaching consequences for secondary industry in the province of Natal. Secondary industry in the province appears to have been more severely affected than that of the Transvaal, where the relative prosperity of the gold mines filtered through to local industries and sheltered them somewhat from the worst of the depression.<sup>161</sup> By contrast, Natal's other major industries, sugar

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157. *Natal Mercury*, 27 June 1932.

158. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 189.

159. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

160. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 189.

and coal, suffered markedly during the depression and thus instead of buoying up local industry, actually further depressed it.

The decline in shipping and in the tonnage of goods shipped also assisted in depressing secondary industry in Natal as, especially in the greater Durban area, there were many concerns intimately linked with the shipping trade. These included those enterprises which supplied the vessels with basic necessities (ships' chandlers) and those who were associated with the repair and maintenance of ocean-going vessels. Engineering and painting contractors, manufacturers of paints and ropes, to provide just a few examples, all depended to some extent on the shipping trade. When this trade declined due to the fall-off in imports and exports, and the government's gold standard policy made Durban's facilities and services more expensive, local industry did suffer.

It is extremely difficult to ascertain accurately what the consequences of the gold standard policy of the Hertzog government were for secondary industry in Natal, as many of the products it produced were intended for sale in local markets and were thus not affected. In fact, imported raw materials used in the manufacture of many of the items Natal industries produced actually fell in price because of the stronger South African pound. Against this must be set the very injurious effects that the policy had on Natal's major enterprises, namely the sugar industry and the coal-mining industry, which filtered through to secondary industry. Politicians of the day made much of the negative effects of the government's policy, but it is difficult to separate reality from rhetoric, and genuine concern from Natal jingoism, as far as secondary industry was concerned.

The government's policy of protecting local industry from foreign competition, especially at a time when most industrial countries were looking to bolster declining sales on domestic markets by obtaining export markets elsewhere in the world, did materially assist secondary industry in Natal. A wide range of products produced by secondary industry in the province enjoyed some measure of tariff protection,

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161. Until further research is undertaken to investigate the effects of the depression in the remaining former provinces, comparative analyses of various industries and sectors are not possible. Straight comparison of Union-wide statistics was not considered to be very meaningful, due to regional variation.

ranging from entirely prohibitive<sup>162</sup> to partially effective. These tariffs shielded, to an extent, those protected local industries from the worst effects of the depression. It is impossible to speculate with any degree of accuracy what the state of secondary industry would have been without this protection, but certain of Natal's industries would definitely have faced strong international competition without it. As far as can be determined, this protection did not win the Hertzog government and the National Party support from Natal's industrialists (apart from some in the sugar industry), on the contrary, the prevailing sentiment in the major urban centres where most industry was located was decidedly anti-government, to the point of outright jingoism. There appear to have been other more pressing issues, such as the maintenance of links with the British Empire and the government's gold standard policy, which diluted the gratitude of Natal industrialists and kept relations cool.<sup>163</sup>

Similarly, it is difficult to determine exactly what impact the "civilised labour" policy had upon employment in secondary industry in Natal during the depression years. It is clear that in most industries white workers were favoured and protected during the retrenchment processes that were necessitated by the economic downswing. Yet there are examples of industries in which this did not happen, or happened to a lesser degree. It may be argued that much depended on the nature of the industry, for in some, a proportion of expensive skilled white labour was easily replaced by semi-skilled workers of colour. Furthermore, this did result in a saving of wages, thus boosting profits while still getting the work done.

There are, however, examples where attempts to employ white labour caused distinct problems with the rest of the workforce:

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162. In the sense that it became futile to try and sell such highly-rated goods; there were cheaper local alternatives. Imports of such goods did decline and exporters in foreign countries did withdraw their products in favour of other, less protected markets.

163. It is obvious that a great deal more research on the chilly relationship between industry and government in this region during the depression is required. Organised commerce and industry in the shape of organisations like the Chambers of Commerce, were overtly apolitical in nature, as they claimed to represent all political persuasions and this is a complicating factor. However, it is possible to make some judgements based on the public utterances of prominent industrialists and businessmen. Almost all such statements were critical of the Hertzog government and its policies. Certain leaders were open supporters of anti-government political movements as will become apparent in the course of the thesis.

...a local factory owner...wanted to try European labour. He agreed to take four youths at £2/5/- per week and to take four more every month until he had a completely European Staff. He was given four youths of excellent character, but the day after they started work the Natives went on strike. The owner is faced with strong competition and could do no other than dismiss the European youths. A certain amount of skill was necessary and it is impossible to carry on the work with all unskilled labour.<sup>164</sup>

A similar case was related to the Wage Board, where it was submitted that African employees in a certain industry approached the owner and asked his intentions as far as European labour was concerned; "...the Natives made it clear that if a single white worker was introduced, they would leave the works at once."<sup>165</sup> This stance was perhaps only possible in very competitive industries where some degree of skill was required from African workers, which prevented their wholesale discharge and replacement by white or other workers.

The favouring of white workers might also have been a result of ingrained racial prejudice — a tendency to "look after one's own" — during the economic crisis. As MacMillan wrote:

With the best will in the world, many South Africans see only the desperate plight of their own kith and kin, the Poor Whites, and the devastating effect of their exposure to competition with poor blacks for unskilled employment.<sup>166</sup>

He went on to write that white employers were convinced that African workers only worked when they wanted to and if dismissed, could simply return to the rural areas:

...in South Africa at the time there was a general conscience-comforting *idée fixe* that a Native is a lucky being, able to live on very little, working only when it suited him - passing lightly between town house and country seat.<sup>167</sup>

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164. Mr S D Roberts, Employment Officer at the Durban office of the Department of Labour, in an interview with *The Natal Mercury*, 26 September 1930.

165. *Natal Mercury*, 8 January 1931.

166. MacMillan, *Complex South Africa*, p. 131.

167. *Ibid.*, p. 118. It will be shown that the "country seat" of Africans was also severely affected by

Some of the tensions operating between the various racial categories of workers and the African response to suggestions that Africans ought to make way for whites during this time of crisis may be gleaned from the pages of the black press. An article from *Ilanga lase Natal* on this topic is worth reproducing at length, as it sums up the position.

...The self-constituted guardians of the white man's interest in South Africa...see a vision of repatriated Natives trekking away from the towns into some invisible part of the country where there is supposed to be work and food for them and this trek will result, of course, in more jobs for the white men who now find it "degrading" to compete with black men on the labour market...Who encouraged the Natives to come to the towns? Was it not the White man who wanted cheap and sufficient labour? Who has "degraded" the white man by competing with the black man? Is it not the white man himself who sees degradation in the work of his hands? And where is the black man who has become urbanised in habit, to go when he leaves the town? Where are these places in the country which provide suitable spheres for him? What about his children, who have grown up and have been educated in the towns? Where are they to find a livelihood in the Backveld? The white man has practically created this problem of urbanised Natives to serve his own ends, and now he proposes to solve it, again to serve his own ends, by squeezing the people out of the homes they have in so many cases established with sacrifice and toil and sending them on a trek to some unknown part of the countryside. They call this segregation. We call it scabrous selfishness.<sup>168</sup>

The generally privileged position of white labour during the depression cannot be entirely ascribed to the operation of the "civilised labour" policy — accurate quantification is simply too difficult. That this was the perception of those discriminated against, if not of those who benefited from it, is not open to doubt.

The chief consequence of the economic downturn in secondary industry in Natal was not so much the decline in output, as unemployment and social dislocation. As employees were retrenched because of the depression, they found that they could

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the depression and that many were in fact trying desperately to obtain work in the urban areas in order to survive. See below, Chapter Six.

168. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 12 February 1932.



not find other employment because the job market was flooded with similarly discharged workers and most industries were retrenching, not hiring, workers. Many of these unemployed persons drifted to the major urban centres, where they posed a serious problem to the local state. The problem of unemployment and the attempted solution to this will be discussed later in the thesis.<sup>169</sup>

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169. See Chapters Seven and Eight.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE COAL-MINES OF NATAL DURING THE DEPRESSION

The early history and development of the coal-mines of Natal has been well documented by Edgecombe and Guest<sup>1</sup> and also by Scott.<sup>2</sup> From its very beginning, the Natal coal industry had to contend with a great number of difficulties. Coal-mining was generally more difficult and expensive in Natal than elsewhere in the Union. However, the major problem which faced Natal collieries was the sale of the coal produced by their mines. By the 1920s and 1930s, Natal coal-mines had been forced by circumstances to rely very heavily on the export market and on the bunkering trade. This made the entire industry very vulnerable to the vagaries of the international commodities market and also exposed the industry to the fluctuating influence on world shipping of the world trade cycle. In these factors lie the key to any explanation of the misfortunes suffered by this important industry during the period known as the Great Depression.

Coal had been discovered in Natal as early as 1838.<sup>3</sup> By 1842 small quantities of coal, transported by ox-waggon, were being sold in Pietermaritzburg. Coal from areas closer to the port of Durban was used in British steamships on a trial basis as early as 1852, thus beginning a long association between Natal coal and the bunker trade.<sup>4</sup> However, mining operations were complicated, and often limited, by difficult conditions<sup>5</sup> and the exorbitant costs involved in transporting coal by ox-

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1. B Guest and R Edgecombe, "An Introduction to the Pre-Union Natal Coal Industry" in Guest and Sellers, *Enterprise and Exploitation*, pp. 309 - 352.
  2. P Scott, "The Development of the Northern Natal Coalfields," *South African Geographical Journal*, Vol. 32, September 1951.
  3. *Ibid.*, p. 57. Edgecombe and Guest suggested that there is little evidence of coal-mining prior to the arrival of the Voortrekkers although they argued that it is extremely likely that prominent coal outcrops might have been utilised for fuel by the early inhabitants of the region. The "discovery" of coal was reputed to have been made by Voortrekkers under the command of Andries Pretorius who camped near Dundee in the late 1830s and early 1840s. See Edgecombe and Guest, "The Pre-Union Natal Coal Industry", p. 309.
  4. *Ibid.*, p. 310.
  5. For a discussion of the difficulties faced by coal miners in Natal see Scott, "Development", p. 53ff; R Edgecombe and B Guest, "The Natal Coal Industry in the South African Economy,

waggon. Expansion was therefore somewhat restricted until the advent of the railways. With the expansion of the railway network of the colony in the 1880s and 1890s, chiefly in response to the discovery of diamonds and gold in the interior, the Natal coal-mining industry experienced a period of considerable growth. This growth was closely linked to the expansion of the railway network and many speculative ventures were launched to coincide with the advent of the railway; some 60 mines were opened between 1888 and 1909, although only a few remained in operation by the latter date.<sup>6</sup> Production, however, did increase enormously; a mere 25 609 tons had been produced in 1889 but, in 1909, the mines produced 1 786 583 tons.<sup>7</sup>

The opening up of the coalfields of the Transvaal in the 1890s brought competition in the supply of coal to the gold mines and related industries on the Rand. Natal coal, although it was generally of a superior quality, was virtually excluded from the lucrative Rand market on the grounds of cost.<sup>8</sup> Mining conditions in Natal were, in the main, far more arduous, causing higher pithead prices. Once transport costs were included, Natal coal could not compete with Transvaal coal on the basis of cost.<sup>9</sup> This difference in production costs was to endure well into the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> To make matters worse, the highly anthracitic nature of much of the coal mined in Natal made its marketability problematic in the early years.<sup>11</sup> Faced with a relatively small domestic market in Natal, and largely excluded from the Rand market, Natal mine owners had to find alternative markets for their coal, or face closure. The sale of coal to the railways, firstly to the Natal Government Railways

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1910-1985," *South African Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Sept. 1987, p. 50 and D R Edgecombe and W R Guest, "Wessel's Nek: A Natal Mining Community in Depression and War", Unpub. paper presented at a Workshop on Natal History, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1982, pp. 1 - 2.

6. Edgecombe and Guest, "The Pre-Union Natal Coal Industry", p. 317.

7. *Ibid.*, Appendix 1, p. 337.

8. Edgecombe and Guest, "The Natal Coal Industry", p. 50.

9. Hall, "Coal Industry", pp. 240 - 241.

10. Edgecombe and Guest, "The Natal Coal Industry", p. 51.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 50. Anthracite only assumed importance in the 1940s, while the valuable deposits of coking coal found in Natal which were so necessary for the production of steel were only properly exploited once the Iron and Steel Corporation (ISCOR) began production in the 1930s. See also Scott, "Development", pp. 62 - 64.

(NGR)<sup>12</sup> and after Union to the South African Railways (SAR), on a contract basis, did improve matters somewhat, as did contracts to supply coal-fired electricity-generating stations both in Natal and the Cape. However, the major outlet was found in the export markets and in the bunkering trade.

Natal coal was exported to a great variety of destinations including India, Madagascar, Mauritius, Argentina and Singapore in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> In the early years of the twentieth century, further markets had been found, as Edgecombe and Guest stated:

Natal's 'normal' markets consisted of East Africa ports such as Dar-es-Salaam and Port Sudan to supply the steam coal requirements of the Tanganyikan, Kenyan and Sudanese railways, and other African ports such as Aden [sic] and Djibouti for bunkering purposes. Other bunkering outlets were Karachi in Pakistan, Colombo in Ceylon and the islands of Madagascar and Mauritius. In the latter case coal was also required for the sugar estates and the railways. Bunkering outlets further afield were acquired in Java, Singapore and Hong Kong, and Natal coal also met the railway requirements of the Philippines.<sup>14</sup>

Links were established between the Natal mines and many London-based shipping agents, most of which had offices world-wide, as well as in Natal. Through the networks of concerns such as Mann George, Mitchell Cotts, Smith and Sons, and Lambert Brothers, Natal coal was marketed to countries on virtually every continent.<sup>15</sup> Competition was fierce and grew fiercer when the developing coal industries in the East, namely those of India, Japan, China, Malaya and the Dutch East Indies, began to produce coal in marketable quantities. Competition was based not only on quality and price, but also on political considerations. For example, from the late 1920s, Natal coal was excluded from the Indian market on account of the Union's racial policies.<sup>16</sup> The erection of protectionist trade and tariff barriers,

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12. Edgecombe and Guest, "The Pre-Union Natal Coal Industry", pp. 322 - 323; also Appendix 2, p. 338. In 1909, the NGR consumed 266 286 tons.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 327. See also Scott, "Development", p. 61.

14. Edgecombe and Guest, "The Natal Coal Industry", p. 52.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 52 - 53.

a relatively common feature of world trade in the late 1920s,<sup>17</sup> also did much to harm the export of Natal coal.

However, the Natal coal industry did benefit from upheavals and resultant shortfalls in production elsewhere in the world. The First World War (1914 - 1918) had an initially disastrous effect, but as the existing suppliers were ravaged by the conflict and the European mining industry had subsequently suffered major disruption, an enormous demand for shipment coal (the term used for both bunker and export coal) was generated. This caused an increase in demand for Natal coal. Strikes in Great Britain in 1921 and 1926 and in Australia in 1923, and the occupation of the coal-rich Ruhr Valley in the same year, caused increased interest in Natal coal and the local industry had to increase production to meet these new demands.<sup>18</sup> Exports of Natal coal are given in Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1**  
**Coal Exports from Natal, 1912 - 1928**  
**(in long tons)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Amount</b>
1912	625 691
1913	689 416
1914	398 213
1915	374 562
1916	182 224
1917	203 817
1918	656 355
1919	466 714
1920	626 127
1921	992 691
1922	1 094 682
1923	1 422 732
1924	1 502 782
1925	1 308 731
1926	1 815 063
1927	1 522 080
1928	1 544 393

**Source: Edgecombe and Guest, "Wessel's Nek", Appendix B.**

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17. See Latham, *Depression*.

18. R Edgecombe and B Guest, "The Black Heart of the Beautiful Mountain: Hlobane Colliery, 1898-1953", *South African Historical Journal*, Vol. 18, 1986, p. 194.

Unfortunately, these demands were most often of a temporary nature and when the crises were over and normal coal production resumed, the unfavourable cost factor once again worked to the local industry's detriment, forcing cutbacks in production and consequently in labour.<sup>19</sup> The Natal coal industry, because of its dependence on exports, was subject to considerable fluctuations; demand was sporadic and difficult to anticipate, resulting in what Edgcombe and Guest term a "slack/rush rhythm".<sup>20</sup> This caused complications in regard to transport and labour requirements and negatively affected the running costs of mines. Investors were also reluctant to put money into such unpredictable ventures.

Relatively more stable, but still uncertain, was the bunker trade. Coal was used for the generation of steam in almost all power-driven, ocean-going vessels at the turn of the century. This trade was therefore relatively stable; as long as vessels called at Durban for purposes of trade, or plied the southern Indian ocean en route to the East and Australasia, the need for bunker coal would exist. However, the competition in this trade was equally fierce and quality and price were determining factors in the successful marketing of bunker coal. The fiercest competition in the East African bunker trade came, somewhat surprisingly, from coal produced in the northern hemisphere.<sup>21</sup> Welsh coal was highly prized as it had a high calorific value and a low ash content. It was made even more attractive by the very low freight charges pertaining to British coal in the inter-war years.<sup>22</sup>

Natal Navigation Collieries and Durban Navigation Collieries were two of the mining groups specifically established to cater for the bunker trade, although most of the other collieries in the region had some share, no matter how small, in the bunker trade.<sup>23</sup> The mines would sell their coal to agents who would then obtain the best price possible from the ships' agents. As the bunker trade was often seen as an economic lifeline in an extremely competitive market, local mines competed, often attempting to undercut prices, when times were hard.<sup>24</sup> In an attempt to

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19. Edgcombe and Guest, "The Natal Coal Industry", p. 53.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 58. See also Edgcombe and Guest, "Hlobane Colliery", p. 194.

21. Edgcombe and Guest, "Hlobane Colliery", p. 194.

22. Edgcombe and Guest, "The Natal Coal Industry", p. 52.

23. *Ibid.*

improve matters, an association of mine owners, the Natal Coal Owners' Association, was formed in 1913.<sup>25</sup> Although price fixing was supposedly beyond the ambit of the Association, it did bring about some degree of co-operation in an otherwise cut-throat industry.<sup>26</sup>

This organisation differed in purpose to the Natal Coal Owners' Society (hereafter NCOS) which had been formed as a counter to more stringent mining legislation in the wake of the great mining disaster at Glencoe in 1908. The Society was Natal's "Chamber of Mines" and dealt mainly with working conditions and wages.<sup>27</sup>

The bunker trade was not only bedevilled by fierce competition but, as the twentieth century progressed, shipowners began the slow process of converting their fleets either to diesel power or to oil-fired boilers, thus slowly reducing their dependence on coal.<sup>28</sup> The motivation for this appears to have been the increasing availability of suitable fuel oil and the limited space that oil occupied on a vessel compared to coal.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, oil could be stored in regions of the ship where coal could not, thus greatly increasing the carrying capacity of the vessel. Larger vessels could also be constructed, as diesel engines were more powerful. More cargo could thus be conveyed on a single voyage, thus making shipping more cost effective.<sup>30</sup> The change, nonetheless, was to some inexplicable, as the triple-expansion coal-fired engine fitted to many vessels plying the Cape sea route had proved itself to be extremely reliable.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps more significantly, oil-burning and diesel ships were

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24. F S Hatton, Manager of the Natal Steam Coal Company, was reputed to have visited the local railway siding where coal was being shipped by rival companies to their customers, whereupon he would hastily offer the customers coal at ½d less per ton. Edgecombe and Guest, "Wessel's Nek", pp. 3 - 4.

25. Edgecombe and Guest, "Hlobane Colliery", p. 195.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Personal communication, Ruth Edgecombe.

28. Edgecombe and Guest, "Wessel's Nek", p. 3.

29. Although oil was generally more expensive and diesel engines for marine usage were still experiencing teething problems, the advantage of increased space was seen to outweigh these difficulties. See Latham, *Depression*, p. 44.

30. B Guest, "An Introduction to the Post-Union Natal Coal Industry" in Guest and Sellers, *Receded Tides of Empire*, p. 97.

31. Latham, *Depression*, p. 44.

faster and, for mailships and passenger liners which had contracted schedules of arrival and departure, such speed was a vital necessity.<sup>32</sup> Whatever the motivation for the change, this factor was to have a significant effect on the Natal bunker market during the depression.<sup>33</sup>

As can be seen from Table 4.2, the sales of bunker coal in the period 1912 - 1928 did fluctuate, especially during the First World War, but after the war sales remained fairly constant, though exhibiting an overall downward trend.

**Table 4.2**  
**Sales of Bunker Coal from Natal Mines, 1912 - 1928**  
**(in long tons)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Amount</b>
1912	1 209 606
1913	1 209 833
1914	1 135 972
1915	898 801
1916	1 523 954
1917	1 690 437
1918	651 644
1919	878 533
1920	1 147 319
1921	1 077 384
1922	1 053 643
1923	1 166 787
1924	1 226 039
1925	1 325 929
1926	1 288 705
1927	1 242 821
1928	1 215 523

**Source: Edgecombe and Guest, "Wessel's Nek", Appendix B.**

Competition and the ever-decreasing number of vessels requiring coal for bunkering purposes were not, however, the bunkering trade's biggest concern. Far more serious were fluctuations in the world trade cycle, or disruptions caused by war, both of which had an extremely negative effect on maritime traffic. The former, of

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32. Guest, "Post-Union Natal Coal Industry", p. 97.

33. See below, pp. 108 - 109.



course, occurred on a large scale during the years of the Great Depression, with unfortunate results for the Natal coal industry. Yet another concern was the ability of the industry, often at relatively short notice, to produce coal for bunkers when demand suddenly surged. This was aggravated by the constant problems associated with railway transport on the single line to the port of Durban. As Guest stated:

The maximization of profits during phases of upswing in the shipment trade had been frequently impeded by congestion on the single-line rail-link to the port, by accident-induced delays or summer rain damage to the line, or by the perennial shortage of trucks which was aggravated by the seasonal preferences accorded to more perishable agricultural freight.<sup>34</sup>

At the onset of the depression then, the Natal coal industry was accustomed to facing challenges. The prosperity of the Natal industry depended on the precarious and volatile export market and on the almost equally uncertain bunker trade. As Brigadier White, Chairman of the Coal Commission of 1946/47 put it:

...the Natal export trade depended very largely upon the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table; that really (Natal) gained at the expense of troubles in other countries: a strike in Australia, or troubles in other parts of the world.<sup>35</sup>

The fact that Natal mines had been forced to depend on the unstable bunkering trade was highlighted by the evidence of A H Fletcher, Managing Director of the Dundee Coal Company to the same Commission, when he said that Natal:

had to build up its business on bunkering and it is rather subject to wide fluctuations, according to the state of the business in the rest of the world. We are dependent on business in other parts of the world. It has always been a struggle in Natal.<sup>36</sup>

That "struggle" was an apt description of the years of the depression cannot be denied. The Natal coal industry was faced with the biggest challenge it had had to meet in its relatively short existence. It did not emerge unscathed from these trying times.

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34. Guest, "Post-Union Coal Industry", p. 96.

35. Quoted in Edgecombe and Guest, "The Natal Coal Industry", p. 51.

36. *Ibid.*

The year 1929 was a record one for the Natal coal industry and it in no way presaged what was to follow. Sales of both export coal and of coal supplied to the inland market were at their peak. The former stood at 1 555 654 tons, or 31 per cent of the record 5 012 652 tons produced during the year, while the latter also reached an all time high of 2 261 400 tons, or 45 per cent of the total. The bunker trade, however, continued on the slow and steady declining trend it had exhibited since peaking in 1917. The fall was not really serious; a mere 19 925 tons or 1,6 per cent from 1 215 523 tons to 1 195 598 tons.<sup>37</sup> However, although the entire industry might have been doing well, individual mines did not necessarily share in this boom. Mr J Townley Williams, Chairman of the Vryheid (Natal) Railway, Coal and Iron Company Ltd (hereafter VNRCIC)<sup>38</sup> made the following remarks:

(The results) were not so good as they were in the previous year, owing to reduced prices brought about by more active competitive conditions not only overseas in regard to export trade, but also locally as affecting sales in the Union of South Africa.<sup>39</sup>

The SAR had been promoting competition in the Union market, in an effort to bring down prices.<sup>40</sup> This appears to have been somewhat balanced by a slight reduction in railway rates on shipment coal, by 1½d to 3d per short ton.<sup>41</sup> Purchases of Natal coal by the SAR were increased in 1929, from 588 649 to 650 446 short tons.<sup>42</sup> Despite this, the only conclusion that may be drawn is that although production was at a record level, this did not mean that profit levels at all mines had also soared. The profits of the VNRCIC, for example, increased by £4 030 to £32 226 but this was still considerably lower than the £47 302 of 1927.<sup>43</sup>

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37. Edgecombe and Guest, "Wessel's Nek", Appendix B.

38. This mine was a wholly-owned subsidiary of Natal Navigation Collieries and Estates Company and exploited the vast resources at Hlobane. See B Guest, "Financing an Infant Coal Industry: The Case of the Natal Collieries", *South African Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 3, No. 2, September 1988, p. 44.

39. Talana Museum (hereafter TM), 22nd Annual Report of the Directors of the Vryheid (Natal) Railway, Coal and Iron Company Ltd. (hereafter VNRCIC), 30 June 1930, p. 13.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

41. TM, Minutes of the Natal Coal Owners' Society (hereafter NCOS), 16 January 1929.

42. TM, NCOS, Chairman's Minute 1929.

43. TM, VNRCIC, 21st Report of the Directors.

This competitive element makes all the more sense when seen against the background of increasing production by the Transvaal coal-mines. By 1928, Natal's share in the total production of the Union had declined to 34,62 per cent from 37,62 per cent in 1926, a worrying trend that was to continue throughout the depression. This trend was not only related to the inland market. Because the distance from the mines in the Eastern Transvaal to Delagoa Bay was almost the same as that from the Northern Natal coalfields to Durban, it meant that the Transvaal mines could also compete in the bunker and export markets.<sup>44</sup>

By 1930, the preliminary effects of the slump overseas had begun to filter down to the local coal-mining industry as the market for both shipment coal and for inland consumption began to weaken. Rumours of a decline in orders from the SAR sent shivers through some mining houses and, at VNRCIC, all recruiting was stopped in anticipation. Urgent communications were sent to the mine's agents, Mitchell Cotts, urging them to find alternative overseas markets.<sup>45</sup> As the position continued to weaken, an unfavourable reply was received from Sir William Mitchell Cotts in London, stating that "...difficulties were being experienced in selling Natal coal oversea".<sup>46</sup> In fact, the SAR, far from reducing its consumption, had actually increased it in the year ended 30 June 1930, to the amount of 702 702 short tons of Natal coal.<sup>47</sup> This may have been a result of the accounting system which ended the financial year at the end of June, thus allowing for a carry-over from 1929, when the situation was somewhat better. The general impression, however, was one of declining demand. These figures might also serve as an indication of reduced consumption by the rest of the inland market.

Production was lowered to 4 454 842 short tons<sup>48</sup> as the shipment trade declined markedly, only accounting for 2 197 244 tons, as against 2 751 252 tons for the

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44. TM, NCOS, Chairman's Minute for 1928.

45. TM, VNRCIC Minute Book, Minutes of a Directors' Meeting, 25 March 1930.

46. TM, VNRCIC Minute Book, Minutes of a Directors' Meeting, 28 April 1930.

47. TM, NCOS, Chairman's Report, 1930.

48. *Ibid.*

previous year, a decline of 554 008 tons, or some 20 per cent.<sup>49</sup> In August 1930, the first suggestion was made of a wage reduction for miners in Natal.<sup>50</sup> Although wages varied considerably, a minimum basic rate of pay had been agreed on by NCOS in 1928 and was fixed at 1s 8d per day.<sup>51</sup> This proposed reduction met with opposition from some mine owners, who pointed out that Natal coal-miners already earned on average 2s less per day than their counterparts on Transvaal mines and it would be necessary for the Transvaal mines to lower their wages first, "...or it would cause friction with the Mine Workers' Association".<sup>52</sup> Some mines posted losses as early as May 1930.<sup>53</sup> Even though production was reduced at most mines during the year and the recruitment of labour was temporarily halted, mines still had considerable running costs. Even the working of "short time" (only a few days of the week), while it saved on wages to miners, did not reduce costs to nothing. The unfavourable economic climate of this year saw the closure of the Ballengeich Colliery, while the Buffalo Colliery was sold to Enyati Colliery.<sup>54</sup> These mines were the first of many casualties. The labour force of the industry in Natal was reduced from 16 372 to 13 479 men in the period 1929-1930.<sup>55</sup>

The onset of the depression was seen as having a small advantage in that as conditions in industry worsened, more African labour became available for the mines:

Generally there has been no shortage of labour in Natal mines. The period of general depression is always accompanied by a full supply of labour for the mining industry. Boys withdrawn from other industrial activities find their way to the mines to seek work.<sup>56</sup>

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- 49. Edgecombe and Guest, "Wessel's Nek", Appendix B.
  - 50. An attempt to standardise the working hours of African miners on mines in Natal and thus more or less standardise rates of pay had been made in 1929. See TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 16 January 1929.
  - 51. Edgecombe and Guest, "Wessel's Nek", p. 10.
  - 52. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 18 August 1930.
  - 53. TM, VNRCIC Minute Book, Minutes of Directors' Meeting, 10 June 1930. The loss amounted to £1 112 for the month of May 1930.
  - 54. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 21 November 1930.
  - 55. TM, NCOS, Chairman's Report, 1930.
  - 56. TM, NCOS, Chairman's Report 1930.

The greater availability of labour, caused by the rapidly deteriorating economic situation, especially in the reserves of Natal and Zululand, meant that labour came under increasing pressure and that less favourable conditions of employment were generally meekly accepted.

The deteriorating conditions in the inland markets prompted discussions about the formation of a closer association of some kind amongst the mines to control the price of coal in Natal other than that sold for bunkering purposes. The General Manager of the Northfield Colliery (owned by De Beers), Mr F Steart, outlined the reasons for this association by stating that the current supply of coal far exceeded the demand and that there was insufficient business to go round. This situation had resulted in the undercutting of prices for inland coal. "Prices had dropped to an absurdly low and uneconomic level."<sup>57</sup> Steart further pointed out that a similarly unsatisfactory situation had existed in the Transvaal until such an association had been formed there. The purpose of the proposed association was to distribute shares of the available trade, especially in the supply of coal to the railways.

We should not overlook the fact that bunker business with the Union Castle Line or any other Line, is becoming less each year, largely on account of the rapid introduction of oil burning ships. We have already suffered much loss of business from this cause, and are likely to suffer more in future. It, therefore, seems to me that we ought to support any genuine movement to make the best of the trade which is left, and which is available.<sup>58</sup>

It appears that De Beers was reluctant to commit itself to such an association but as Steart pointed out, it could still obtain coal for its own use at any price it chose.

The association was formed as the Natal Associated Collieries (Pty) Ltd. from 1 January 1931, indicating the level of urgency wrought by the crisis. The participating collieries were allocated shares of the existing inland trade, while the

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57. De Beers' Archives (Kimberley) (hereafter DBA), S4/NC 1, F Steart to Secretary De Beers Consolidated Mines, 16 June 1930.

58. *Ibid.*

prices charged for coal were regulated to prevent undercutting.<sup>59</sup> According to J Townley Williams, Chairman of NCOS, the new company would show some immediate benefits to the collieries but as many of them were committed to long-term contracts, the full benefit would only accrue when these terminated.<sup>60</sup> Williams later wrote:

The effect of this [the formation of the company] was to eliminate the ruinous effect of competition and to fix prices on a more satisfactory basis. Prices are now better stabilised and financial results have improved, but not to any great extent as owing to the times it would appear that only moderate increases in the price of coal for Union customers have been made.<sup>61</sup>

It is surely a measure of the magnitude of the economic crisis that such a company was formed in a market that had previously seen cut-throat competition in what was perceived as a struggle for survival. The creation of a price-fixing cartel also flew in the face of *laissez faire* capitalism, but there is no evidence to suggest that it engendered any disapproval.<sup>62</sup>

It was also in this year that the "token system" was called into question. In his evidence to the NEC, Major Peachey, lately Magistrate and Native Commissioner for Vryheid, had condemned the practice of issuing trading discs to Africans by storekeepers on the mines, "...by which they were induced to spend all their wages at the stores, so that they had no money left when they went home".<sup>63</sup> Archdeacon A W Lee also raised this issue in his evidence when he stated that Africans who went to the coal-mines sent almost nothing home "...owing to the system of tied stores obtaining on the coal-mines".<sup>64</sup> It appears that little notice was taken at this stage,

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59. Edgecombe and Guest, "Wessel's Nek", p. 4. See also TM, NCOS, Chairman's Minute 1930.

60. TM, NCOS, Chairman's Minute, 1930.

61. J Townley Williams, "Coal", in *The Garden Colony*, National Publicity Corporation, Durban, 1932 (no pagination).

62. The practice was well established in the Transvaal with the Transvaal Coal Owners' Association, so was unlikely to elicit much criticism.

63. Reported in TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 24 September 1930.

64. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Archdeacon A W Lee, Dundee, 17 September 1930, p. 1449.

but the issue was subsequently to resurface with greater prominence as the depression deepened, especially in the rural areas.<sup>65</sup>

By 1931, the Natal mines were firmly in the grip of the depression and with sales constantly falling, production was further reduced. Production fell by a further massive 952 512 tons, or by 21 per cent. As the general economy of the Union slumped, there was less need for rail transport and consequently, the SAR reduced its consumption to 663 941 short tons.<sup>66</sup> Not only did inland sales fall, but the sales in the shipment trade (exports and bunkering) declined by a massive 605 749 short tons, or by 28 per cent.<sup>67</sup> This had very serious consequences for some mines:

Owing to the large fall-away in shipment trade, due to the abnormal world conditions and the consequent reduction in the requirements of the SAR Administration, who is our largest individual customer, the output for the year was 127 850 tons less than that of the previous financial year. This average loss of upwards of 10 000 tons per month has had a very serious effect upon profits.<sup>68</sup>

So serious was this effect that no dividend was paid by the company on the paltry profit of £5 534.<sup>69</sup> The precarious position of the Natal mines was further aggravated when Great Britain left the gold standard in September 1931. Many British dominions and territories (and even those countries which were outside the Commonwealth but which had strong trading ties with Great Britain) were forced, or chose, to follow suit.<sup>70</sup> The Union of South Africa did not. This had the effect of making all South African products, including coal, more expensive on the world market. The result was a fall in the sales of shipment coal.

The Union government responded by allowing a 10 per cent subsidy on coal exports.

65. See below, pp. 98ff.

66. TM, NCOS, Chairman's Report, 1932.

67. Edgecombe and Guest, "Wessel's Nek", Appendix B.

68. TM, VNRCIC, 23rd Annual Report of the Directors, 1931, p. 14. The effects of the gold standard will be described in detail below.

69. TM, VNRCIC, 23rd Annual Report of the Directors, 1931, p. 14.

70. Latham, *Depression*, pp. 57 - 60.

Railway rates on the transport of coal had already been reduced prior to the sterling crisis; rates having been cut by 5s per short ton. The mines also reduced their pithead prices by 1s 2d per short ton, in an effort to boost sales.<sup>71</sup> The government subsidy, although welcome, was, in the opinion of Mr Steart "...an insufficient offset to the adverse exchange rate..."<sup>72</sup> In reporting a loss of £28 9s 0d for December, Steart attributed this to the decline in the shipping business. He went on to say:

The subsidy of 10 per cent on export coal is totally inadequate and as a result this class of business is rapidly becoming impossible on account of competition from overseas.<sup>73</sup>

Northfield Colliery had only worked for 18 days in December and Steart had decided to work the mine for only 3 days per week the following month. As much labour as possible was being retrenched.<sup>74</sup> A further negative result of the exchange rate emerged the following February:

...the further serious handicap of the exchange rate has added to the burden and has no doubt further curtailed the number of ships calling in Natal...The 10 per cent subsidy has been proven to be totally inadequate to meet the exchange handicap and in order to compete on the eastern markets, coal must be sold at such a ridiculously low pit head price as to involve the collieries committed by contracts to heavy losses.<sup>75</sup>

No evidence can be found of the exact amount lost through mines having entered long-term contracts prior to the devaluation of sterling but as this was fairly common practice, it is more than likely that a considerable number of mines would have been forced to sustain losses in this manner. This is borne out by the fact that the matter was raised at the Natal Coal Owners' Society, during a debate on whether the society should lend its support to an anti-gold-standard movement. Interestingly, the matter had been raised by Mr Otto Siedle, a well-known Durban businessman connected to the Dundee Coal Company, who was serving on an anti-gold-standard

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71. DBA, S4/NC3, Weekly Reports of General Manager, Northfield Colliery, October 1931. See also TM, NVRIC, 23rd Annual Report of the Directors, 1931, at p. 14.

72. DBA, S4/NC3, Report of the General Manager, Northfield Colliery, October 1931.

73. DBA, S4/NC3, Report of the General Manager, Northfield Colliery, December 1931.

74. *Ibid.*

75. DBA, Unsorted Box, F A Steart to Secretary of De Beers, 15 February 1932.



committee established by the Mayor of Durban.<sup>76</sup> Siedle appears to have been attempting to solicit a financial commitment to this committee from the society but this was turned down. The society, at the urging of the chairman, J Townley Williams, did not pass any resolution against the gold standard<sup>77</sup> but adopted the stance that:

... the government should be kept fully informed as to the export coal position and the losses falling on the Collieries, otherwise it might be thought that they acquiesced in the position.<sup>78</sup>

This is not to suggest that J Townley Williams was in favour of the maintenance of the gold standard. In an article published in 1932 he wrote:

Like all other industries dependent mostly on exports for its sustenance, the Natal coal industry has fallen on evil days. The crisis is, however, world wide, and it will be difficult, if not impossible to secure real and extended adjustment without a change of policy or the co-operation of many countries. Whatever the unseen advantages of the gold standard may be, there is nothing but misfortune in it, so far, for coal.<sup>79</sup>

The effect on the collieries of Natal was spelt out: the adverse exchange rate resulted in a loss of 3s per long ton, while the subsidy only amounted to 1s 1½d per long ton. It was concluded that:

...it was impossible to continue exporting other than to carry out existing long contracts, and on these the Collieries were faced with a heavy loss.<sup>80</sup>

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76. Siedle was a partner in the Durban branch of the shipping line Bullard King and Company and from 1915 was the managing director of the Dundee Coal Company, becoming its deputy chairman in 1932. It was largely on Siedle's initiative that the Natal Coal Owners' Society had been formed in 1909. Siedle was also a founder member (and later president) of the Natal Chamber of Industries. He was an extremely well-known and influential personality in the Natal regional economy. See Guest, "Financing an Infant Coal Industry", p. 47.

77. Edgecombe (in a personal communication) has pointed out that the Natal Navigation Group kept considerable reserves in London and this may have been a factor in the stance taken by Williams.

78. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 28 December 1931.

79. J Townley Williams, "Coal".

80. *Ibid.*

Not all the mining companies were equally affected by the exchange crisis. Some, like the Natal Navigation Group (including the VNRCIC), which were registered in London, were having some receipts for coal exports remitted to London in sterling. The Union government, however, refused to pay any subsidy on coal exports unless the proceeds of such sales were remitted to the local company.<sup>81</sup> The VNRCIC had extensive holdings in London, amounting to some £39 374 at the end of June 1932,<sup>82</sup> rising to £43 344 in September of 1932, while at the same time, it was running an overdraft of some £9 610 with a local bank to cover production costs.<sup>83</sup> Its parent company (Natal Navigation Group) maintained a policy of keeping substantial cash reserves in sterling in London, selling coal and delaying the repatriation of the proceeds until such time as the exchange rate should have improved. These companies appear to have been attempting to shield themselves from the negative effects of the exchange rate and were also hoping to turn an increased profit when the Union was finally forced to leave the gold standard, as the money could then have been repatriated at a profit.<sup>84</sup> However, losses on exports eventually forced the VNRCIC to repatriate some of this money and receive subsidy on it.<sup>85</sup>

Attempts by NCOS to have the subsidy on coal raised were met by government refusal. The Minister of Agriculture responded on behalf of the Minister of Finance, stating that an increased subsidy was not possible "...due to the financial depression".<sup>86</sup>

In the face of the crisis, attempts were also made to reorganise the Natal Coal Owners' Association (which had been formed in 1913 to control the bunker trade) in order to expand its membership and allow other mines, which were not members and therefore did not share the benefits of the bunker trade, to join.<sup>87</sup> Some

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81. TM, VNRCIC, Minutes of a Directors' Meeting, 30 March 1932.

82. TM, VNRCIC, Minutes of a Directors' Meeting, 1 July 1932.

83. TM, VNRCIC, Minutes of a Directors' Meeting, 21 October 1932.

84. Had the Natal Navigation Group not been able to pursue this policy, a profit of £19 412 on sales in London at the end of June 1932, would have had to be converted into £9 079 in South African currency. (Personal communication, Ruth Edgecombe.)

85. TM, VNRCIC, Minutes of Directors' Meeting, 6 April 1933.

86. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 1 March 1932.

collieries with vested interests, like the Durban Navigation Collieries which was owned by the Union Castle Company, were reluctant to give up any share of the market. Durban Navigation not only demanded that it should be allowed to supply the needs of its own company, but wanted a further share of the bunker trade in addition.<sup>88</sup> By holding out and refusing to compromise, Durban Navigation was offered exclusive bunkering rights to six of the most important shipping lines calling at the port of Durban but was still reluctant to share the trade.<sup>89</sup> The Association was eventually re-formed, with Durban Navigation getting not only the exclusive rights to the six shipping lines previously offered, but a further 13 per cent of the remaining trade, up to a total of 272 000 tons.<sup>90</sup> The adverse exchange rate and the general decline in shipping, however, resulted in declining demand for bunkers and so the reorganisation did not really ameliorate the situation.

Faced with losses incurred on exports and with reports of the SAR favouring Transvaal mines over Natal mines in supply contracts for coal,<sup>91</sup> all the Natal mines could do was to economise and hope to ride the crisis out, as indeed they had already been doing. Employee numbers had been reduced and continued to be reduced<sup>92</sup> and further prospecting had already been suspended. In the case of the Natal Navigation Group this was "...deferred pending a more favourable cash position and a better development of the position of the Natal coal trade and of the Natal Navigation Group".<sup>93</sup>

Yet the difficulties of 1931 were not over, for in November the whole issue of the token system was revived by a letter from the Director of Native Labour, Major J Cooke, enclosing a letter received by him from the delegates of the United Transkeian Territories General Council, who had visited the mines of Northern

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87. DBA, S4/NC2, F Steart to Sir Robert Kotze, 22 October 1931.

88. DBA, S4/NC2, F Steart to Secretary De Beers, 20 November 1931.

89. DBA, S4/NC2, Steart to Secretary De Beers 25 November 1931.

90. DBA, S4/NC2, F Steart to Secretary De Beers, 17 December 1931.

91. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 28 March 1931.

92. See TM, VNRCIC, Minutes of Directors' Meeting, 8 June 1931.

93. TM, VNRCIC, Minutes of Directors' Meeting, 8 June 1931.

Natal. The delegates were "greatly concerned" that mine stores on the collieries were granting credit to African miners by issuing tokens or celluloid discs called *skilivanas*, which were then exchanged for goods and, more importantly, beer. This was termed "a most pernicious system of credit" and resulted in "many of the labourers wasting all their earnings to the detriment of their families". The credit was redeemed on pay-day as storekeepers were allowed to sit in the pay office and collect monies due to them from the labourers.<sup>94</sup>

It may well have been a strategy by which the mines tied employees to them for extended periods of service, as argued by Edgecombe<sup>95</sup> and also by Guest.<sup>96</sup> Edgecombe made a forceful case when she wrote:

When a new recruit arrived at the mine he was already in debt for cash advances and his rail fare. He immediately needed to purchase a blanket, billycan, and boots. The mine storekeeper issued him with tokens to pay for the goods. These were known as *skilivanas* ("trash money"). The tokens came in denominations of 3 pence, 6 pence and 1 shilling (with no intermediate values), and would be used by the new recruit to purchase his requirements. The recruit also had to use tokens to purchase his other needs: bread and meat from the store, items such as soap, matches and tobacco, and beer from the beerhall. The supply of tokens was unlimited. The storekeeper recovered these advances on payday, when the recruit had completed his ticket of thirty shifts. Typically, little or nothing was left of his pay by this stage. To see him through the next ticket of his contract of six or nine months, he had to acquire more tokens. Recruits thus stepped onto a treadmill of debt. They had little or no money to remit home, or to buy a beast for *lobola* (bride wealth). They had no funds for their rail fare home, or to provide food for the journey, and tended to remain on the mine.<sup>97</sup>

Certainly, this view was borne out by evidence of black miners themselves and by the Inspector of Native Labour for Dundee, who cited one case in which a miner

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94. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 19 November 1931.

95. D R Edgecombe, "Labour Organisation, Accommodation and Resistance on the Natal Coal Mines, 1889 - 1989" in K Tenfelde (ed.), *Towards a Social History of Mining in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, C H Beck, Munich, 1992, p. 772.

96. B Guest, "Post-Union Natal Coal Industry", pp. 87 - 88.

97. R Edgecombe, "The Role of Alcohol in Labor Acquisition and Control on the Natal Coal Mines, 1911-1938" in J Crush and C Ambler (eds), *Liquor and Labor in Southern Africa*, University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1992, pp. 190 - 191.

had not been able to send money home once in eleven years.<sup>98</sup> Archdeacon Lee also confirmed this in his evidence to the NEC: "...those who go to the coalmines send almost nothing, owing to the system of tied stores obtaining on the coalmines."<sup>99</sup>

One serious effect of the token system was to deprive those desperate households from whence the workers had come of a sorely needed lifeline in the heightened economic crisis they were experiencing. Farmers and storekeepers other than those on the mines were also seriously affected by this system. The system was decidedly to the advantage of the mine managements, for it retained skilled miners and improved efficiency. It can also be argued that the token system was intimidatory, forcing workers into docility and preventing agitation, as there was the closest co-operation between the mine managements and the storekeepers.<sup>100</sup>

The initial response of the mine owners was one of dismissal; they argued that beer halls on the mine property were necessary "...because of illicit drinking outside of mine properties and resultant failure to report for work on Mondays". It was also suggested that tokens or "good-fors" were in any case, illegal.<sup>101</sup> The matter was then referred to the Mine Managers' Association, which reported back stating that the report of the delegates was inaccurate and that conditions on the mines had been "greatly exaggerated". Beer was seen as food and Africans did not "dissipate" their entire earnings on beer. Whether *skilivanas* were or were not illegal, the mine managers argued that credit arrangements were made by all storekeepers and the managers were unanimous that "...such procedures should not be disturbed". They were, however, prepared to withdraw *skilivanas* if necessary.<sup>102</sup> This recommendation was accepted by the mine owners at their next meeting, where it was decided that *skilivanas* would be withdrawn with almost immediate effect. The

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98. *Ibid.*, pp. 191, 193.

99. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Archdeacon A W Lee at Vryheid, 18 September 1930, at p. 1449.

100. Edgecombe, "Alcohol", pp. 192 - 193.

101. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 19 November 1931.

102. TM, NCOS, Minutes of the Mine Managers' Association, 3 December 1931.

rationale was given as follows:

Members generally expressed the opinion that the system of allowing the mine stores to issue these *skilivanas* was open to many abuses and it was not in the interest of the Collieries to encourage it, it being pointed out among other considerations that it tended towards a monopoly by the mine stores and higher prices for the requirements of the natives, making them ultimately dissatisfied with the conditions at the mines.<sup>103</sup>

Workers were definitely being exploited as prices at mine stores using tokens were considerably inflated.<sup>104</sup> If, as Edgecombe and Guest argue, the *skilivana* was a strategy for tying workers to the mines, then it can only be suggested that the depression with its twin effects of pressurising the rural communities and of making labour more abundant, allowed or necessitated the decision to abolish them. It appears clear that the government was desirous of mine workers remitting part of their pay home in order to alleviate the crisis in the rural areas. Workers had been hesitant to criticise the token system for fear of victimisation or dismissal, but storekeepers in the districts of the mines were much less hesitant and protested against the monopoly enjoyed by the mine stores at a time when the economic downturn had severely affected their trade.<sup>105</sup> In the event, the mine storekeepers won a stay of execution until the end of March 1932.<sup>106</sup> The government banned the use of tokens and coupons in 1934.<sup>107</sup>

Labour on the mines was obviously one of the biggest expenses to mine owners and the weak demand which had led to a significant fall in coal production also necessitated a further reduction of workers on the mines. Reductions were made across the racial divide, the workforce being reduced by 20 per cent from 13 479 to

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103. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 28 December 1931.

104. Edgecombe, "Alcohol", p. 192.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 196.

106. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 27 January 1932.

107. Union of South Africa, *Government Gazette* No. 1087, dated 3 August 1934. The battle over *skilivanas* raged on as the notice in the *Government Gazette* was subsequently declared *ultra vires* after it was challenged in court by Mine Stores (Natal) Ltd, but the government eventually had its way and tokens and all other forms of credit to employees on mines and works were prohibited from 1 March 1938. See Guest, "Introduction to the Post-Union Natal Coal Industry", p. 88.

10 747 in the course of 1931. Interestingly, there was no favouring of white workers as might have been expected with the government's emphasis on "civilised labour". Indeed, a higher percentage of white workers (21 per cent) was retrenched, compared to only 20 per cent of African and 17 per cent of Asian workers. Overall, the Natal coal industry had shed some 6 915 jobs since the heady days of 1927, a decline of 39 per cent.<sup>108</sup>

In an effort to further trim expenses for the forthcoming year, the Mine Managers' Association was mandated by the mine owners to investigate a general reduction in the wages of African workers. A reduction of 15s per month was mooted, seeing that the sugar industry, Natal's other major industry, was reputed to have already reduced wages by that amount. Some collieries had already reduced the wages of those workers (mainly white) who earned more than £3 per month.<sup>109</sup> Wage reductions had resulted in a "wildcat" strike by 600 African miners at the Natal Navigation Collieries near Dundee in August 1931.<sup>110</sup> The issue was resolved promptly and the miners returned to work the very next day, but perhaps this incident coloured the outlook of the mine managers, for they appeared to be very cautious in their reply. The mine managers pointed out that there existed no uniformity of wages between the mines and that most managers had already reduced wages of "natives and coloureds" and were still in the process of doing so. They added that Africans "...earned their wages", and that any further reduction would see their best employees leave for the gold mines. Furthermore, they pointed out, the wages of those Africans employed under contract could not be interfered with. They therefore felt that no general wage cut should be implemented, but that this matter should be left to the individual mine managers.<sup>111</sup>

Production in 1932 was further reduced and only 2 811 170 short tons of coal were produced, a decline of 691 164 short tons, or 19,7 per cent over the previous year. The shipping trade declined by a significant 27 per cent, from 1 591 495 short tons in 1931 to only 1 165 163 short tons in 1932.<sup>112</sup> This was mainly due to a decline of

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108. TM, NCOS, Chairman's Report, 1932.

109. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 27 January 1932.

110. *Natal Mercury*, 18 August 1931.

111. TM, NCOS, Minutes of the Mine Managers' Association, 4 February 1932.

some 33 per cent in exports, brought about by the poor rate of exchange and increasing competition on world markets as producing countries desperately tried to sell coal for whatever could be had for it.<sup>113</sup> Increasing quantities of coal, mainly from Japan, flowed onto the eastern market, depressing prices to an unprofitable level. Natal mines continued to export coal, some of them at a loss, in the hope of retaining markets until conditions should improve.<sup>114</sup> On the inland market, the SAR once again reduced its consumption to 580 572 short tons, helping the inland market to absorb 13 per cent less Natal coal.<sup>115</sup> Mining was far from profitable, the Natal mines only declaring a combined total of £35 355 in dividends, or 3,02d per short ton,<sup>116</sup> a far cry from the £205 718 or 11,4d per ton declared in 1927.<sup>117</sup>

Labour was further reduced in response to the adverse conditions, the total labour force falling from 10 747 in 1931 to 8 259, a decline of 2 488, or 23 per cent. In these retrenchments, unlike those of 1931, only 11,5 per cent of white workers were retrenched, 20 per cent of Asians and 24 per cent of African workers.<sup>118</sup> It may very well have been that the "civilised labour" policy had come to the mines but there is no explicit evidence to substantiate this. It seems more likely that the lower number of skilled white workers retrenched could mean that the lowest level on which mines could operate with skilled manpower had been more or less attained.

Some mine authorities showed genuine human compassion about retrenching workers. Sir Robert Kotze of De Beers wrote as follows to Steart:

...I trust that you have not had to dismiss too many employees. It's the most distressing feature of declining business and one shudders at the thought of men without work and families without men.<sup>119</sup>

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112. Adapted from Edgecombe and Guest, "Wessel's Nek", Appendix B.

113. DBA, S4/NC3, Report of the General Manager, Northfield Colliery, February 1932.

114. Edgecombe and Guest, "The Natal Coal Industry", p. 53.

115. TM, NCOS, Chairman's Report, 1933.

116. *Ibid.*

117. TM, NCOS, Chairman's Minute, 1932.

118. TM, NCOS, Chairman's Minute, 1933.

119. DBA, Unsorted Box, Sir Robert Kotze to F Steart, 22 February 1932. Exactly what Sir Robert meant by the final phrase is unclear, but he might have been referring to migrant



Sir Robert wrote again early the following month, expressing his desire to help alleviate the distress of a discharged white worker.<sup>120</sup> Sir Robert appears to have lobbied the De Beers board for some sort of charitable relief for the Northfield community, for Steart was given permission to dispense £100 for charitable work at the colliery.<sup>121</sup> This must be seen against the fact that the mine was losing money; the Northfield Colliery had lost £481 9s 0d since November 1931.<sup>122</sup>

In early January 1932 information was received that the Magistrate of Vryheid, acting on the instructions of the Director of Native Labour, had withheld a labour agent's recruiting licence for the recruiting, in certain areas of Zululand, of labour for the coal-mines. This action was prompted by the desire to prevent the spread of malaria. The Native Recruiting Corporation, which supplied some of the labour needs of the gold mines was fighting this restriction.<sup>123</sup> The Mine Managers' Association also reacted negatively, noting that "...boys from the districts mentioned had been employed on the Natal Coalfield for the last thirty-five years, without harmful consequences to themselves or others". They were further of the opinion that this attempt was "high-handed" and ought to be resisted, or future labour supplies from Zululand might be adversely affected.<sup>124</sup> In discussing the report of the mine managers it was noted by the owners that "large numbers of boys" were leaving Zululand to seek work on the gold mines and while the current situation was that there was a surplus of labour for the coal-mines, this would not always be so. As a result, the mine owners were against any restriction on the recruitment of labour.<sup>125</sup>

The spectre of African workers being siphoned off to the gold mines was a very real one indeed. Van der Horst has shown that the number of Africans from Natal and

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labourers.

120. DBA, Unsorted Box, Sir Robert Kotze to Steart, 5 March 1932.

121. DBA, Unsorted Box, Secretary of De Beers to F Steart, 23 March 1932.

122. DBA, S4/NC3, Reports of the General Manager, Northfield Colliery, December 1931 to February 1932.

123. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 27 January 1932.

124. TM, NCOS, Minutes of the Mine Managers' Association, 4 February 1932.

125. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 1 March 1932.

Zululand employed on Witwatersrand mines was increasing rapidly during the depression years. In 1928, 5 005 African labourers from Natal and Zululand were employed on those mines but by 1934, there were 12 289,<sup>126</sup> an increase of 7 284, or 146 per cent. Van der Horst attributes the steep rise to the prevailing drought in Northern Natal and Zululand.<sup>127</sup> This is indeed a significant finding, for as Smith pointed out, mine work was not popular with Natal Africans<sup>128</sup> and the situation must have attained serious proportions to make mine work attractive. However, it remains to be explained why the Witwatersrand was preferred to Natal. The most likely explanation for the efflux to the Witwatersrand lies in the fact that work on the coal-mines of Natal was both difficult to come by at this time because of the depressed conditions in this industry (as opposed to the vibrancy of the gold mines) and further, that the work was not as well remunerated as work on the gold mines. General working conditions on Natal coal-mines were also far less favourable.<sup>129</sup> The latter factor was a source of concern and may help to explain why the mine managers and owners appeared to be prepared to abolish the *skilivana*.

As the depression deepened, the mine owners became more and more insistent that the Union government should fully understand the effect the adverse exchange rate was having on their industry. In January 1932 a letter was written to the Minister of Finance, N C Havenga, illustrating their claims with an example:

The effect of the exchange would be readily seen from the following figures. On a selling price, say, of 12/- per ton of 2 240 lbs. F.O.B. Durban, the exchange at 30% comes to 3/7d per ton. In the amount of 12/- is included (in the case of the Northern Natal Navigation Collieries, near Paulpietersburg, which have depended for years almost entirely on their shipment trade for their existence) an amount of 6/5d for railage, and there is 1/3d to cover the cost of shipment at the Port of Durban. These three items (3/7d, plus 6/5d, plus 1/3d) total 11/3d, which leaves only 9d per ton to the Colliery for their coal. To this add 1/- per 2 000 lbs. (say 1/1½d per 2 240

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126. Van der Horst, *Native Labour*, pp. 216 - 217.

127. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

128. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 320.

129. Guest, "Post-Union Coal Industry", pp. 87ff.

lbs.) the rebate on export coal trade, and the colliery gets a total of 1/10½d, which is several shillings below actual out of pocket cash costs. The Northern Natal Navigation Colliery is furthest away from the Port of any of the Natal Collieries.<sup>130</sup>

Nor was the situation for those mines closer to Durban any different, for what they saved on railage had to be expended on working costs, as the mines of Dundee (the closest) had thin coal seams and were more difficult to work.<sup>131</sup> The effect of the exchange rate had been to reduce the sale of coal for export and the mine owners' letter claimed that many collieries had ceased exporting coal, while others which were committed to long-term contracts were incurring great losses. The letter concluded on a grim note:

If no relief is given at an early date the export of coal from Natal in cargoes oversea [*sic*] will, in all probability, cease altogether - that is, as soon as the cash resources are exhausted of Collieries still continuing to sell coal for export.<sup>132</sup>

As already shown, the government did not accede to the mine owners' request for the subsidy on coal to be increased to at least 25 per cent.<sup>133</sup> Despite the obviously serious position the mines were in, their protests were strangely muted and there is no evidence to suggest that the mine owners became more militant in their demands. Nor is there any evidence to suggest that NCOS placed any political pressure on the government or on the M.P.s that represented coal-mining districts to ameliorate the position of the coal-mines.<sup>134</sup> The Natal Devolution League,<sup>135</sup> however, wrote a pointed letter to the Prime Minister which stated:

It may be news to you, Sir, to learn that we reared a large bunkering trade at the Port of Durban owing to the fact that we

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130. TM, NCOS, Appendix to Minutes of Meeting, 1 March 1932.

131. *Ibid.*

132. *Ibid.*

133. See above p. 97.

134. Why mine-owners did not adopt a more militant stance has yet to be satisfactorily explained. It may be postulated that the weakness of Natal coal in the international marketplace may have been a contributing factor. The paucity of evidence does not allow any final explanation. Professor Ruth Edgecombe, one of the acknowledged experts on coal-mining in Natal, was also unable to shed any light on this. Personal communication, Ruth Edgecombe.

135. See below pp. 326ff.

supplied the cheapest coal in the world, coupled with the knowledge that its quality was the finest in the Southern Hemisphere. This was a trade peculiar to Natal as the bulk of this coal was supplied to steamers who did not discharge any cargo in South African ports. Everyone of these vessels left behind considerable sums of money for repairs, stores, etc. in addition to the value of the coal they bought...We again repeat that your persistence in maintaining high railway rates plus the gold standard has effectively ruined the export of coal to other countries and incidentally the whole industry.<sup>136</sup>

The depression claimed another victim as the Wallsend Colliery was closed down, unable to survive the trying economic conditions.<sup>137</sup>

So deep was the psychological state of depression in the industry that even the departure of the Union from the gold standard at the end of December 1932, although it improved the likelihood of an increase in the shipping trade, was not expected to bring about an immediate recovery.<sup>138</sup> In actual fact, the depression had begun to lift from November 1932, and the departure of the Union from the gold standard did indeed improve matters. A further reduction of 5d per ton in the price of bunker coal at Durban was also helpful in recapturing some, though not all, of the bunker trade.<sup>139</sup> The total production of the Natal mines increased in 1933 from 2 811 170 tons to 3 116 708 tons, an increase of 305 538 tons, or 10,9 per cent. Even the shipment trade showed an increase of 156 856 tons, or 13,5 per cent, to a total of 1 322 019 tons.<sup>140</sup> The recovery was not evident in the consumption of the SAR, which only consumed 497 547 short tons of Natal coal in 1933, a further decrease of 14 per cent over the previous year.<sup>141</sup> The general improvement in production was accompanied by a 9 per cent increase in the number of labourers employed on the mines, the total labour force rising to 9 006 in 1933.<sup>142</sup>

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136. CAD, A32 (Hertzog Papers), F99, Colonel E M Greene (Natal Devolution League) to Hertzog, 7 October 1932.

137. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 31 March 1932.

138. DBA, S4/NC3, General Manager's Report, December 1932.

139. DBA, S4/NC3, General Manager's Report, January 1933.

140. Adapted from Edgecombe and Guest, "Wessel's Nek", Appendix B.

141. TM, NCOS, Chairman's Minute, 1933.

142. *Ibid.*

Although coal production and profits rose,<sup>143</sup> the Natal coal industry had not yet fully recovered from the depression and hard times still prevailed. Most mines were still not working full time. Operations at the Makatee's Kop mine had been suspended; those at New Tendega Collieries were greatly curtailed. The Tshoba mine had stopped producing shipment coal and De Beers had cut their losses and sold the Northfield Colliery to the Natal Navigation Group for a bargain £50 000.<sup>144</sup> The Hattingspruit mine had also been closed.<sup>145</sup>

Although the worst of the depression was over, it was not until 1944, when the unusual demands of the Second World War greatly boosted production, that the Natal coal industry was able to produce as much as had been produced in 1929.<sup>146</sup> Competition on the export market remained fierce during the rest of the 1930s. The fortunes of one company serve to illustrate this. The VNRCIC produced 148 196 tons or 40,9 per cent more coal in the financial year ended 30 June 1934 than it had done in the previous financial year, but the profits accruing to the company had risen by an insignificant 4,6 per cent to only £37 747 from £36 081 the previous financial year. The reason given was that prices for export coal had had to be cut for the sake of competitiveness on the international market.<sup>147</sup>

Indeed, the competition in the bunker trade had been severe throughout the depression years. At times, when cargoes were small, some European vessels carried enough coal to make the round trip to the Union and back, to avoid paying what was considered to be the exorbitant charges levied for Natal's bunker coal.<sup>148</sup> More worrying to those in the bunker trade was the rapid increase in the number of oil-burning vessels calling at Durban. The number of these vessels increased

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143. The Natal mines paid a combined dividend of £55 609, or 4,28d per ton in 1933. TM, NCOS, Chairman's Minute, 1933.

144. TM, NCOS, Chairman's Minute, 1933.

145. TM, VNRCIC, 25th Annual Report of the Directors, June 1933, at p. 13. Edgecombe (in a personal communication) avers that this took place because of the exhausted reserves of the mine, rather than as a consequence of the depression.

146. Edgecombe and Guest, "Wessel's Nek", Appendix B.

147. TM, VNRCIC, 25th and 26th Annual Reports of the Directors, 1933 and 1934.

148. Edgecombe and Guest, "The Natal Coal Industry", p. 53.

dramatically, as Table 4.3 illustrates:

**Table 4.3**  
**Number of Oil-Burning Vessels calling at Durban, 1926 - 1935**

Year	Number
1926	50
1927	70
1928	90
1929	135
1930	210
1931	226
1932	253
1933	317
1934	379
1935	479

**Source:** TM, NCOS, Chairman's Minutes for relevant years.

Taking the depression years of 1929-1933 alone, the increase in the number of oil-burning vessels is significant, some 135 per cent. And this increase must be viewed against the background of the shrinkage in world trade and the consequent reduction in the number of vessels of all types calling at the port of Durban.<sup>149</sup> Thus not only were fewer ships (fewer potential customers) calling each year, but an increasing proportion of those which did call, were no longer potential customers for bunker coal. This helps to explain why the bunker trade was steadily declining and also why it failed to recover in the years after the depression.<sup>150</sup>

The precarious position of the Natal coal industry becomes clear when the profitability of the mines during the depression years is examined. Allusions have already been made to this, but table 4.4 sets the position out in detail:

**Table 4.4**  
**Total Dividends paid by Natal Coal-Mines, 1927 - 1934**

Year	Total (£)	Per Ton
1927	205 718	11,40d
1928	116 802	6,76d
1929	115 878	6,20d
1930	111 636	6,74d
1931	43 248	3,32d
1932	35 355	3,02d
1933	55 609	4,28d
1934	117 036	8,99d

**Source:** TM, NCOS, Chairman's Minutes for relevant years.

It is clear from table 4.4 that coal-mining in Natal was barely profitable during the worst of the depression years and that profit margins had shrunk due to the economic crisis. What must be noted is that these figures reflect only the dividends paid by coal-mining companies; they do not take into account companies which failed to declare dividends during the depression years. It is also worth noting that the onset of the crisis in the coal-mining industry was only reflected in dividend payments from 1931 to 1933 and that recovery was very noticeable in 1934.

The depression in the coal-mining industry of Natal had resulted in a large reduction of the labour force during the worst of the economic crisis, as table 4.5 illustrates:

**Table 4.5**  
**Labour force on Natal Coal-Mines, 1929-1933**

Year	Labour force
1929	16 372
1930	13 479
1931	10 747
1932	8 259
1933	9 006

**Source:** TM, NCOS, Chairman's Minutes for relevant years.

It is interesting that during this period of stress, very little labour unrest was experienced on coal-mines in Natal, despite adverse conditions such as reductions in wages, the introduction of short time, retrenchments and gross exploitation through the token system.<sup>151</sup> Part of the explanation of this may lie in the very depressed

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149. Union of South Africa, *Year book* No. 16, 1933/34, p. 687. See also A Lumby and I McLean, "The Port of Durban" in Guest and Sellers, *Receded Tides of Empire*, p. 39.

150. Edgecombe and Guest, "Wessel's Nek", Appendix B. The bunker trade did improve considerably during the Second World War, when coal-burning vessels were pressed into service to meet war-time requirements, but even this revival was shortlived.

151. According to Edgecombe (in a personal communication) this was a feature of the coal-mines in Natal throughout their long history and so it should not be seen as remarkable. It nevertheless remains interesting that despite the severe deterioration of working conditions during the depression years, miners remained docile when all sorts of pressures were operating on them.

conditions pertaining in the country, and in the reserves in particular, and in the intimidatory nature of the token system. Part of it, however, may also lie in the fact that the mine owners had been absorbed into an alliance which included sugar barons and other vested commercial farming interests in rural Natal.

This may be seen in the contribution made by the mine owners to the Native Affairs Organisation Fund, set up by the Revd John Dube, to cultivate a favourable employment climate in those areas from which the mines (together with other commercial concerns) drew their main supply of African workers. Evidently Dube had been approached by the sugar industry (which had contributed £750) "...to counteract adverse influences on the native labour supply, especially that of the ICU". The mine owners agreed to advance the fund an amount of £250, of which £125 was to be paid immediately.<sup>152</sup> In reporting back in November 1932, the Chairman of NCOS, J Townley Williams, said the following:

The Rev. J. Dube had done a good deal of effective work in the desired direction through his newspaper and by interviewing Native Chiefs in Natal and Zululand, and part of the fund had been expended in buying him a new printing press and a cheap motor car to go round the country interviewing the Chiefs.<sup>153</sup>

Exactly how effective Dube actually was is difficult to ascertain, but it is known that he was a very influential figure in Zulu society, with strong connections to the Zulu royal family.<sup>154</sup> This scheme of Dube's appears to have been the culmination of a long association between influential Zulu nationalists, connected to the formation of the first Inkatha, and an alliance of Natal sugar barons and other commercial farmers. The object of the "alliance" was to suborn the Zulu royal family and Inkatha into acting in their best interests as far as labour supply and the control of "agitators" were concerned.<sup>155</sup> It appears that the coal-mines were drawn into this alliance by the late 1920s and early 1930s, although little direct evidence can be

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152. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 10 June 1929.

153. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 23 November 1932.

154. Cope, *To Bind the Nation*, pp. 177ff.

155. *Ibid.*, pp. 206ff. See also Edgecombe, "Protest", p. 780 and La Hausse, "Ethnicity and History", p. 287.



found. It is worth noting, however, that the mine owners had previously promised to contribute the sum of £50 to Dube's Ohlange Institute.

The Chairman said he thought the institution was a very useful one and worthy of support, *Mr Dube himself being quite a good man from the Collieries' point of view.*<sup>156</sup>

This donation was called for in a letter dated 10 March 1934, accompanied by a list of donors. The list included representatives of sugar interests and local influential businessmen, as well as the Native Recruiting Corporation.<sup>157</sup> There appears to have been a widespread belief in Dube's and the Zulu nationalists' abilities to maintain a regular supply of docile black labourers.<sup>158</sup>

Perhaps more significant in the question of a stable workforce is the role played by married African workers permanently resident on mine properties. Most collieries in Natal had been established on farms bought or leased for mining purposes and the original black inhabitants continued to live there and work on the mines. Furthermore, the coal-mining areas of Northern Natal contained the largest concentrations of privately owned black land in the province.<sup>159</sup> The importance of this may be inferred from the reaction of the mine owners when a dispute arose between the collieries and the Director of Native Labour, Major Cooke, over the numbers of married Africans residing permanently on mine properties in the Vryheid and Dundee areas. Major Cooke pointed out that this large scale settlement was a contravention of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act.<sup>160</sup> Some 2 516 African males (and presumably, their families) resided in the married quarters of 25 collieries in these two districts in 1931.<sup>161</sup> As the dispute dragged on, the mine owners attempted to involve the Minister of Native Affairs, Mr E G Jansen,

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156. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 2 September 1929. (My emphasis added.) Exactly what was meant is unclear, but the import is clear.

157. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 29 March 1934.

158. Edgecombe and Guest, "Hlobane", pp. 217 - 218.

159. Edgecombe, "The Role of Alcohol", p. 189.

160. TM, NCOS, Appendix A (Cooke to NCOS, 21 April 1931) to Minutes of Meeting 28 May 1931.

161. TM, NCOS, Appendix A to Minutes of Meeting, 28 May 1931. These were reports of the Inspectors of Native Labour, Messers C Eager and C Cope of the Vryheid and Dundee districts respectively.

informally. Jansen had evidently told one of the managers, Mr W T Heslop of the Utrecht Colliery, that "...what was objected to was drunkenness and immorality in these locations and unauthorised natives being harboured there".<sup>162</sup> The mine owners were confident that they could deal with these problems but suspected that the major objection of the Department was to detribalisation.<sup>163</sup> The mine managers were willing to make some accommodation in order to arrive at a *modus vivendi* with Major Cooke, but they reaffirmed their belief that married Africans were an essential component of the workforce:

There are a large number of experienced native labourers on the Natal Coalfield who live with their wives in mine married quarters, and the mine managers submit that such a drastic step as clearing these boys off the properties, would be against the best interests of the collieries... With the intermittent working which is taking place at present on the coalfield, married boys are preferable to single, as the latter are mostly contracted to serve a certain number of shifts, and idle days become more irksome to them, and lead to no end of mischief. The conditions in Natal cannot be judged by those on the Witwatersrand, as they are so dissimilar...It was felt that economic conditions being as they were, the Department of Native Labour should not unduly harass the Natal mines...<sup>164</sup>

The managers therefore suggested that the married African miner was more stable and less volatile during trying economic times. Another factor was highlighted by Mr R Campbell, general manager of the Hlobane Colliery:

All work performed by coloured labourers in and about a Colliery cannot be looked on as unskilled work. There is a large number of natives employed on skilled work as Boss boys, coal cutter drivers, timber boys, rail boys and rope splicers, while on the surface there are responsible jobs in the compound, native hospital, in and around the screening plant and in the workshops. Native labourers cannot become proficient in any class of work if they are to be in employment for a few months only, after which they are encouraged to return to their homes for a time....With the falling off in the number of Indians employed it is now essential to develop a class of labour to take the place of the Indians, and this can

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162. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 30 July 1931.

163. *Ibid.*

164. TM, NCOS, Minutes of the Mine Managers' Association, 3 September 1931.

only be done by having at least twenty per cent of the labour on the coalfield permanently residing at the collieries. Underground efficiency is perhaps more dependent on the experienced native than on the European miner. It would be nothing short of a calamity if the coalfield is to be deprived of the very efficient class of labour that is resident in the Native Married Quarters. There should therefore be no restriction on the number of married native employees on any colliery. Efficiency can only be obtained by properly trained workmen, and the necessary skill cannot be acquired unless a man is in regular employment.<sup>165</sup>

Far from wanting to implement "civilised labour" policies, Campbell was arguing that the skilled African worker, permanently resident on the colliery, was more necessary for purposes of efficiency than a European miner. Married African miners, therefore, were an asset that the mine managers and owners were reluctant to see disappear. The local farmers, however, were most unhappy about the large numbers of Africans resident on mine property or on lands leased by the mines, as these areas attracted Africans who would otherwise have been working on farms.<sup>166</sup>

The reduction in the number of Africans working on the mines during the depression might also have had the effect of reducing militancy:

At two of the Collieries between 3 000 and 4 000 Natives were discharged and some of the Collieries have been closed down. Many of the Collieries' Natives with bad records were recruited in Johannesburg and other large urban centres. They were frequenters of the Colliery beer canteens and most serious crime was committed by Natives of this type. No doubt the Colliery Companies in reducing the number of Native labourers have retained the more law-abiding hence the reduced number of criminal cases from the Collieries.<sup>167</sup>

The Natal coal-mines were fortunate in not having labour disputes to compound their other difficulties during the depression. Due to the economic crisis, there appears to have been a spirit of co-operation between the mine managements and the mineworkers, to the extent that even some of the racial barriers which had been

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165. TM, NCOS, Minutes of Meeting, 19 November 1931.

166. Edgecombe and Guest, "Wessel's Nek", pp. 17 - 18.

167. NAD, 3/Vry, F474, Magistrate of Vryheid's Report for 1931.

erected over time began to crumble. One example of this was the way in which African, Indian and "coloured" miners were trained as rescue workers on the mines. NCOS operated a rescue station outside Dundee,<sup>168</sup> where miners were specially trained for rendering assistance (mainly in the rescuing of trapped miners) during mine disasters. The station had always been manned by white miners, who were paid extra for their training period, and whilst on duty. From 1931, miners other than white were trained as rescue workers,<sup>169</sup> without any complaint being made by the white Mine Workers' Union. The fact that NCOS saved approximately £290 p.a. by doing this was certainly a factor in this decision.<sup>170</sup>

Viewed in totality, the depression years were indeed difficult years for the Natal coal-mines. Faced with an economic slump that most people concerned with the industry could neither understand nor have predicted, the industry found itself on shaky financial ground as the markets they had come to rely on, namely the export and bunkering markets, began to decline. Desperate attempts to improve sales came to nothing, as the world-wide recession had depressed global trade and the government's policy of remaining on the gold standard simply further aggravated the already dire situation. The Natal coal industry was particularly hard hit, as prices obtained for Natal coal fell by 12,4 per cent between 1928 and 1932, largely as a result of the falling prices in the shipment trade, while prices for Transvaal coal fell by only 2,3 per cent in the same period.<sup>171</sup>

The few concessions made by the government, in reducing rail tariffs and by paying a 10 per cent export subsidy, were totally inadequate and ineffectual in meeting the crisis facing the coal-mines. Attempts to make the government aware of the plight of the coal-mines of Natal also met with very limited success, forcing the mines to implement measures to cut costs and to share what little trade existed. It should not be seen as surprising, therefore, that the depression years saw the formation of Natal

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168. It had been established in 1924. Personal communication, Ruth Edgecombe.

169. Edgecombe does draw a distinction though. She points out that the task of black mine workers involved in rescue work was largely confined to post-disaster clearing up work, while white miners still did the initial, dangerous rescue work. Personal communication, Ruth Edgecombe.

170. TM, NCOS, Minutes of the Mine Managers' Association, 16 April 1931.

171. Ravenscroft, "Depression", p. 21.

Associated Collieries to control and distribute the trade available on the inland market, or that the Natal Coal Owners' Association, which controlled the bunker trade, should have been broadened to include more collieries. The price-fixing cartels created by these measures were a significant consequence of the depression years.

Mines were forced to cut costs wherever possible and few mines functioned at full capacity during the depression years, most working only 3 or 4 days per week. All prospecting was halted and maintenance was kept to a minimum. The largest cost-saving measures adopted were to be seen in the retrenchment of miners, many thousands being laid off during the economic crisis.<sup>172</sup> This obviously had consequences for unemployment figures, although some of those discharged did move to the gold mines. Mining towns in Northern Natal suffered greatly, especially when the crisis deepened and some of the mines were shut down.

Once the government went off the gold standard, the situation did begin to improve and sales and wage levels recovered somewhat, but it would be a long time before the coal industry in Natal and all those associated with it, could forget the years of struggle occasioned by the Great Depression.

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172. See Table 4.5 above.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### AGRICULTURE IN THE DOLDRUMS

There can be little doubt that, of all the areas of economic activity in Natal, agriculture was amongst the most severely affected by the Great Depression. It is also clear, however, that the economic position of most farmers in Natal, like that of farmers throughout the Union and indeed, the western world, had been steadily declining for some time before 1929. Furthermore, the unfortunate situation of many farmers in Natal at this time was greatly aggravated by natural disasters in the shape of a severe drought and the resurgence of various agricultural pests and diseases. As if this were not a heavy enough burden, farmers also had to cope with the effects of the Hertzog government's manipulation of the currency.

This chapter will investigate the situation that prevailed in the major components of agriculture in the province outside of the so-called "native reserves" or "locations." This division is somewhat artificial, but since the Land Act of 1913 brought into being (or otherwise enforced) two separate spheres of agricultural activity — one market and export-orientated, largely practised by whites, and one which was almost exclusively geared to subsistence production conducted by Africans<sup>1</sup> — it has been decided to keep this division for the sake of convenience. As Nattrass wrote:

The two sections of South African agriculture are so different from one another that when one moves from a White-owned modern capital using farming sector to a Black subsistence orientated and tribally organised farming area, it is almost like stepping through a time warp. Because these sectors are so very distinct it is essential to consider both the characteristics and the extent and nature of the contribution that these two sectors have made to South African economic development separately.<sup>2</sup>

The situation in the reserves will be investigated in the following chapter. For convenience, and following the format of Hurwitz<sup>3</sup> and Minnaar,<sup>4</sup> this study

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1. Hobart Houghton, *South African Economy*, p. 45.
  2. Nattrass, *The South African Economy*, pp. 99 - 100.
  3. Hurwitz, *Agriculture*.

examines agriculture in its component sectors (often referred to as "industries") rather than adopting a geographical approach.

To avoid a counterproductive plethora of detail, only those sectors of primary importance, in terms of either their financial or political connections, have been investigated. For example, the plight of cotton- and tea-farmers, although they were severely affected by the depression, has been largely ignored as few farmers were involved and the industries themselves were of relatively little importance, either financially or politically. For the purposes of this thesis, a broad view of the effects of the depression on agriculture was more important than a minutely detailed study.

Natal's agricultural potential is limited. Although the region contains 40 per cent of South Africa's usable water, the topography of the province, with its steep rise from the sea to the towering peaks of the Drakensberg, punctuated by hilly, broken terrain, is such that only 22 per cent of the land is actually arable. Of that, 37 per cent has been described as having "high" potential, 28 per cent "medium" potential and the rest is "marginal".<sup>5</sup> From its very beginnings, organised white agriculture has had a strong orientation to the production of export staples and has been fairly diversified in nature. In the twentieth century, the coastal regions have seen a rapid growth of sugar farming, virtually to the exclusion of all else; while the Midlands region, the so-called "mist-belt" became more diversified, with wattle, wool, maize and dairying being the chief agricultural activities. In the northern districts, still more diversification existed, with cattle ranching, sheep farming, maize and fodder production being the norm. The domestic market for Natal's produce has always been relatively small, as the vast majority of the population were themselves subsistence farmers.<sup>6</sup>

## Sugar

Natal's major agricultural activity was sugar farming.<sup>7</sup> From its very beginning in the 1840s, the sugar industry had enjoyed mixed fortunes, with periods of prosperity

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4. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture".

5. B Guest, "The Natal Regional Economy 1910-1960, in Historical Perspective", *South African Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 5, No. 12, 1990, p. 23.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 23 - 24.

alternating with periods of economic crisis with an almost monotonous regularity. Shortage of capital, high interest rates, crop disease, competition from low-cost sugar imported from Mauritius and fluctuating prices obtainable overseas, all contributed to make the early years of the industry very precarious indeed.<sup>8</sup> The situation improved somewhat in the decade before Union, when large blocks of fertile land in the higher rainfall areas of Zululand were opened up to white settlement. By the 1920s and 1930s, canefields covered most of the coastal plain, inland to the 1 500- to 2 000-foot contour line.<sup>9</sup> The importance of this development is that the spread of cane discouraged continued experiments with other crops such as coffee, tea and cotton, which had been unsuccessful in the nineteenth century. By the 1930s, very little else was grown by white farmers in areas that were suitable for sugar-cane.<sup>10</sup>

This led to a monoculture in many of these regions,<sup>11</sup> the produce of which, once most of the needs of the domestic market had been met, was forced to compete on international markets.<sup>12</sup> Being subject to laws of supply and demand, prices fluctuated. Unlike wattle, where Natal enjoyed a virtual monopoly, sugar was produced in large quantities by many countries, both developing and developed. In addition, cane-sugar had to compete with sugar manufactured from sugar-beet, an important crop in many European countries.<sup>13</sup> During the First World War, the production of sugar-beet declined markedly, thus stimulating the production of

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7. I R Behrmann, "A Study of the Economics of Sugar-Cane Production in Natal", Ph.D. (Agric. Econ.) thesis, University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), 1959, p. 23.
  8. Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, pp. 38 - 43. *Memorandum of the South African Cane Growers' Association to the Board of Trade and Industries*, (hereafter *Memorandum*), 1934, p. 12.
  9. Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, pp. 41 - 43.
  10. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
  11. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 129, Note 202. See also Behrmann, "Economics of Sugar-Cane Production," p. 8.
  12. R Barnett, "The Natal Sugar Industry: its development since Union (1910) and its Economic Importance to South Africa," M. Econ. thesis, UNISA, 1938, p. 156.
  13. M Tracy, *Government and Agriculture in Western Europe: 1880-1988*, (3rd ed.) Harvester, New York, 1989, p. 149. Tracy argued that in the case of Britain a government subsidy to sugar-beet farmers greatly promoted the industry. In 1924 there were 22 000 acres planted to sugar-beet, but by 1934 there were 396 000 acres so planted.



cane-sugar in the world outside Europe.<sup>14</sup> The high prices obtainable for sugar greatly stimulated the industry;<sup>15</sup> international prices rose from £10 2s 6d per ton in 1914 to £90 per ton in August 1920. After this, however, the prices fell precipitously to £13 per ton in January 1922, recovering to £26 10s in 1924. Then the downward trend resumed as production and consumption recovered, the price reaching £9 per ton in 1928.<sup>16</sup>

Such prices were far below the ruling price in the Union and brought about the reappearance<sup>17</sup> of the objectionable practice of "dumping." "Dumping" was defined as selling surplus produce on the international market at prices far below those current in the producing nation. While in the short term such measures benefited the consumer in the importing nation, it obviously had an extremely deleterious effect on the industry of that country. Consequently, all over the world, countries began to erect tariff barriers to keep unwanted quantities of such products, including sugar, out of their domestic markets. The Union of South Africa was no exception. It was essential for the Natal growers and producers that they should retain control of the local or domestic market and so prevent the uncontrolled importation of "foreign" sugar. Appeals to government began soon after Union and, by the end of 1929, government protective measures had resulted in a protective tariff of £12 10s per ton<sup>18</sup> on sugar imported from the United States of America (which had been refining Cuban sugar), Canada (after Cuban sugar had been re-routed there),

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14. Prior to the war 9½ million tons of cane-sugar were produced and 9 million tons of beet-sugar. The latter fell to only 3 million tons in 1919/1920, while the production of cane-sugar increased from 13 million tons in 1920/1921 to 20 million tons in 1927/1928. The production of beet-sugar gradually recovered and in 1927/1928, had reached nearly 10 million tons. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 120.
  15. This is also true of the Natal industry, but to a much lesser extent. While it forced producers to produce sufficient quantities to meet local requirements, they did not reap the benefits of greatly increased prices as the industry had engaged in voluntary price fixing at £17 10s per ton to prevent the actions of "profiteers". Barnett, "The Natal Sugar Industry", p. 34.
  16. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 120.
  17. This was not a new phenomenon in the Union; "dumping" had been known even prior to 1910, when German beet-sugar was so disposed of. Barnett, "The Natal Sugar Industry", p. 155.
  18. *Ibid.*, p. 152. Barnett cites the Customs Tariff Amendment Act (No. 32 of 1930). Minnaar puts the tariff at £11 10s per ton. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 123. It appears that Minnaar's figures do not include the £1 excise duty, whilst Barnett's do.

Czechoslovakia and Germany.<sup>19</sup>

Further measures worth noting had also been taken. These included price control, embodied in the Sugar Prices Control Act of 1926, which fixed wholesale and retail prices and the so-called "Fahey Agreement" of 1926.<sup>20</sup> The latter is of importance, because *inter alia* it enforced co-operation between millers and growers, whose interests had often conflicted in the past.<sup>21</sup> Growers would henceforth be paid according to the sucrose content of their cane, not its mass. Both growers and millers would share the risks involved in exporting sugar into the volatile world market, through a quota system. This was essential as an increasing proportion of the sugar crop was having to be exported to avoid the creation of a large local surplus and thus an increasing demand for a price cut.<sup>22</sup>

At the onset of the depression, therefore, the Natal sugar industry was already accustomed to hardship and privation, having survived many vicissitudes, often, admittedly, with a great deal of government assistance. So much so, that by the late 1920s it could be argued that the industry had come to rely on cordial relations with the Nationalist government, whose policies of protectionism had greatly advanced the fortunes of the industry.<sup>23</sup> It should come as no surprise then, that even amongst the "sugarocracy" who were traditionally supporters of the South African Party,<sup>24</sup> some prominent figures, including George Hulett,<sup>25</sup> W Seals-Wood,<sup>26</sup> W

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19. Barnett, "The Natal Sugar Industry", pp. 161 - 162; Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", pp. 122 -123.

20. Named after the Chairman of the investigation, Mr F J Fahey, who later became the President of the Board of Trade.

21. See A G Hammond, *The South African Cane Growers' Association: The First Fifty Years, 1927 - 1977*, South African Cane Growers' Association, Durban, 1977, pp. 13 - 65. The Agreement could not withstand the various pressures occasioned by the falling prices, the depression and drought, and was more honoured in the breach than in the observance by both parties.

22. In the twentieth century, sugar was first exported on a large scale in 1918/1919; by 1930, more than a third of the total sugar crop had to be exported. Barnett, "The Natal Sugar Industry", p. 156; Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 122.

23. The acreage under cane increased by 50 per cent between 1924 and 1932, because of the protectionist policies of the Hertzog government. Behrmann, "Economics", p. 34.

24. M D Lincoln, "The Culture of the South African Sugarmill: The Impress of the Sugarocracy", Ph.D. thesis, University of Cape Town, 1985, p. 127.

25. Hulett had written two letters to Hertzog in August 1929, informing the leader of the National

A Campbell,<sup>27</sup> C J Rapson, and Leon Renaud, declared themselves to be National Party supporters.<sup>28</sup> This also helps to explain, in some measure, the increased assistance afforded the industry as the depression deepened, and the vehement opposition to any suggestions of secession made by the devolutionists.<sup>29</sup>

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Party of his intention to start a local branch of the party and calling for the support of cabinet ministers. Hulett also wanted an assurance "for propaganda purposes" that the National Party government was not seeking to sever links with the British Commonwealth. CAD, A32 (Hertzog Papers), F96, G N Hulett to Hertzog, 14 August 1929 and 28 August 1929. Hulett also mentioned in his letter of 14 August 1929 that Mr Edwards, Managing Director of Hulett and Company's Refineries "...is heart and soul with us". The Prime Minister replied congratulating Hulett and affirming that "...the National Party has never stood for secession and most decidedly after the 1926 declaration by the Imperial Conference, never will". CAD, A32, (Hertzog Papers) F96, Hertzog to Hulett, 31 August 1929.

26. Seals-Wood was Managing Director of Lever Brothers SA, and a part-time sugar farmer. He wrote the following to Hertzog: "During a visit to my sugar farm in Zululand a few weeks ago, I took the opportunity of addressing a meeting of planters, upon which occasion I said that from my knowledge of the Government, I felt certain that the best interests of the planters would be protected. At the same time I hinted in a jocular way that it seemed somewhat curious that so many planters who had received such protection from the Government would hold political allegiance elsewhere. I found that quite a number of individual planters were strong supporters of the Government, and I feel that possibly a visit by a responsible Minister through the sugar belt in Natal and Zululand would do good..." CAD, A32 (Hertzog Papers), F94, W Seals-Wood to Hertzog, 19 November 1929.
27. Campbell's name was mentioned by Seals-Wood in his letter to Hertzog: "My friend William Campbell (Managing Director of Natal Estates Ltd.), feels precisely as I do on the subject. Indeed, he has been out-spoken [*sic*] in saying that the honourable thing to do is to support the Government that has done so much for the Sugar Industry..." Seals-Wood went on to relate how Campbell had succeeded in bringing pressure to bear on the *Natal Mercury* (Campbell was one of the largest shareholders in the newspaper) to ameliorate the paper's attitude to the Government. CAD, A32 (Hertzog Papers), F94, Seals-Wood to Hertzog, 19 November 1929.
28. A branch of the National Party was formed at Mount Edgecombe on 13th of December 1929. At the founding meeting C J Rapson said: "The Nationalist Government is a protectionist Government...and it is for this reason that I am standing for nomination. When I was last in Capetown [*sic*] saw General Smuts, who admitted that the Sugar Industry needed protection, but a number of members of his Party were against it. Not only does the Nationalist Government support the Sugar Industry, but also the steel and diamond cutting industries, as well as many others. The fact that the Nationalist Government offer support to these industries influenced me in changing my policy." *South African Sugar Journal* (hereafter *SASJ*), December 1929, p. 815. George Hulett had earlier formed another branch of the National Party on 24 August 1929. *SASJ*, August 1929, p. 469.
29. The devolution movement will be discussed in Chapter Nine below. The Devolutionists were antagonistic towards the industry because of this lack of support and consequently opposed the government subsidy scheme: "It gives us no great measure of satisfaction to see a few individuals wax rich at our expense." CAD, A32 (Hertzog Papers), F99, Colonel E M Greene (Natal Devolution League) to Hertzog, 7 October 1932.

Furthermore, the storm of protest that was unleashed following the Hertzog government's decision to remain on the gold standard blew much less forcefully among sugar interests than it did in other agricultural sectors, even though the policies of the government caused losses of several hundreds of thousands of pounds.

**Table 5.1**  
**Sugar Cane Production in Natal and Zululand, 1928-1934**

Year	Acres harvested	Yield per acre (tons)
1928-29	129 786	20.38
1929-30	130 857	20.75
1930-31	144 874	22.39
1931-32	139 774	18.90
1932-33	180 921	19.29
1933-34	181 490	20.24

**Source:** Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, p. 48.

Table 5.1 shows quite clearly that apart from the slight decline in the 1931/32 season, occasioned by a variety of natural factors, the acreage of cane harvested continued to increase at a rapid rate, being in 1933/34 some 50 704 acres or 39 per cent more than in 1928/29. It follows then that the planting and maturing of cane continued throughout the depression years, despite the precarious nature of the industry and falling prices. Actual production of sugar also increased markedly in the early years of the depression but, as the drought struck, the industry suffered a setback as the sucrose content of the cane declined, resulting in lower yields.

**Table 5.2**  
**Sugar Production, Exports and Export prices, 1928-1934**

Year	Production Tons	Exports Tons	Export Price £ Per Ton
1928-29	295 934	96 681	12.19
1929-30	298 635	123 590	7.75
1930-31	393 205	210 632	7.71
1931-32	325 933	146 977	7.12
1932-33	358 905	185 451	5.71
1933-34	391 173	190 811	7.43

**Sources:** Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, p. 48 and Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 130.

What is clear from Table 5.2 is that while the proportion of South African sugar produced and exported showed a steady rise from 33 per cent in 1928/29 to a peak of 54 per cent in 1930/31, before dropping to between 45 per cent and 50 per cent, the prices obtainable on the overseas market showed a dramatic decline, falling by more than 53 per cent between 1928/29 and 1932/33. Thus, although more was exported, a great deal less money was realised, substantially increasing the pressure on the growers and millers. One of the largest and most well-established companies, J L Hulett and Sons, did not pay dividends in 1931/32 or in 1932/33.<sup>30</sup>

The Company's records show that up to two years ago, in the course of its lifetime it only once failed to pay dividends on its shares and that was in 1907, when East Coast Fever and Horse-sickness decimated the live stock of this country. With the world's conditions as they now are, and sugar at such a low ebb abroad, dividends are out of the question...<sup>31</sup>

The fluctuations in the world price of sugar, caused by overproduction, brought about an international agreement, known as the Chadbourne Agreement, to limit production in the principal producing nations.<sup>32</sup> The Union was not a signatory to this agreement, as Natal sugar already enjoyed an imperial preference in Great Britain and Canada, in common with other Commonwealth states. However, the immediate effect of this agreement was temporarily to stabilise the international market, which was to the advantage of all producers. Cuba, however, could not afford to restrict her production and soon resumed the "dumping" of sugar on the world market, necessitating another rise in the protective tariffs operative in the Union, as Cuban sugar refined in the United States of America could then be landed in Durban at £2 5s cheaper than the local selling price.<sup>33</sup> The tariff was accordingly raised in March 1932, but the government demanded a *quid pro quo* from the industry, in the shape of a reduction in the local price, which had been fixed by the

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30. SASJ, January 1932, p. 5 and January 1933, p. 3.

31. SASJ, January 1933, p. 3.

32. This Agreement was operative from May 1931 to September 1935, but was also more honoured in the breach than in the observance, especially by Cuba. Barnett, "The Natal Sugar Industry", pp. 157 - 158.

33. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 124.

Sugar Prices Act of 1926.<sup>34</sup> The reduction was made largely in response to a steady stream of propaganda, allegedly emanating from the Rand.<sup>35</sup> The arguments advanced held that the South African domestic consumer was being exploited and that cheaper Cuban sugar should be imported.<sup>36</sup>

As if all these tribulations occasioned by the fluctuations in price and dumping were insufficient, Natal sugar farmers also had to contend with the forces of nature, in the shape of a crippling drought and an invasion of locusts. In 1930 and 1931, rainfall in Zululand was considerably below average, resulting in a significant loss of production. The loss amounted to some 327 000 tons of cane (or 30 000 tons of sugar), which was only partially offset by the increased production resulting from new areas, namely the Ntambanana and Nkwaleni Valley areas. Many of the farms established by the government in Zululand were small, being on average 428 hectares in extent, the objectives having been to provide opportunities for as many farmers as possible, and to exclude the large companies. This meant that such farmers were very hard hit by this natural disaster, as they had not diversified, nor was it possible for them to do so in so short a period of time.<sup>37</sup> Many of them had

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34. Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, p. 46 and Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 125. These measures were embodied in the Customs Tariffs (Amendment) Act, No. 25 of 1932. Also laid down in the act were prohibitive dumping duties against all countries which exported sugar to the Union at prices lower than the domestic value of sugar in the producing nation. Unscrupulous importers in the Union were able to get round this provision by routing sugar through The Netherlands and other non-producing countries, against whom no barriers had been erected.
  35. This was not anything new. In April 1929 George Heaton Nicholls, M.P. for Zululand had warned: "In the past our Sugar Industry has failed in regard to propaganda. You cannot relieve your mind of the fact that the Industry is not popular in South Africa, and it is not popular because of the weight of prejudice which has come down from other days. After all, we are supposed to be the introducer of the Asiatic, and we are also being charged with being a people who have bled this country white." *SASJ*, April 1929, p. 204.
  36. See "Rand Magnates Distort the Sugar Position" in *SASJ*, October 1930, p. 689 and an interview with Mr D M Eadie, in the same journal, March 1930, pp. 161 - 163. Such propaganda continued well into 1933. See Editorial, *SASJ*, April 1933, p. 173 which commented at length on remarks made by a planter, Major Anderson, who deplored the unsavoury image of the sugar industry and argued that positive counter-propaganda was necessary.
  37. Some farmers who had planted exotic trees in order to assist in the drying of their lands, were able to survive by selling timber, but this strategy was limited to those who were fortunate enough to have harvestable plantations by the onset of the crisis. For more detail on this aspect, see A de V Minnaar, *uShukela: A History of the Growth and Development of the Sugar Industry in Zululand: 1905 to the Present*, HSRC, Pretoria, 1992, pp. 141ff.

sunk all their capital and had borrowed heavily to establish their farms, leaving them exceedingly vulnerable and unable to withstand any setback.<sup>38</sup> To further complicate matters, cane growers in Zululand did not have clear title to their land, the allotments having been allocated on a 99-year leasehold system, which rendered them ineligible for assistance from the Land Bank. This naturally upset the farmers.<sup>39</sup>

Yet worse was to come for during 1933 the rainfall pattern was severely disrupted and very little rain fell during critical times for the cane farmers. Much of the cane planted in Zululand died, or was so low in sucrose content that it was deemed unmillable. Many farmers cut their cane down to save the roots, leaving the debris to act as a mulch, so preventing further moisture loss.<sup>40</sup> Mills in Zululand agreed to make token payments to growers, to assist in the crisis.<sup>41</sup> The government declared most of Zululand a drought area, paving the way for rail concessions, but this assistance was insufficient to enable many farmers to remain on the land.<sup>42</sup>

In August 1933, after an absence of some twenty-five years, the red locust once more made an appearance in Zululand, spreading later to Natal. At first, damage was rather limited, but concern was expressed that this invasion was merely the beginning of a serious problem, as indeed, it proved to be. The first swarm moved quite rapidly down the coastal plain, somewhat hampered by the fact that there were few open, sandy places where egg-laying could take place. The only open spaces were along roads and railway lines, bordering cane-fields. Damage was inflicted especially on young cane, south of Durban.<sup>43</sup> The extent of the damage was increased to some extent by the incompetence of Department of Agriculture officials, who advised farmers not to destroy hoppers when they hatched, but to wait

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38. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 125.

39. For more detail on this controversy, see Minnaar, *uShukela*, pp. 68 - 70.

40. *SASJ*, August 1933, p. 449.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *SASJ*, May 1933, p. 245. The journal put the number of farmers who had had to give up their farms in Zululand as "...Not far short of fifty..."

43. *SASJ*, August 1933, pp. 407 - 409.

until they congregated in mass formation. However, the hoppers, on hatching, simply moved into the cane, which made spraying difficult. In their anger and frustration, some farmers even blamed their Indian fellow cane growers:

Indian planters are reported to be responsible for a great deal of the damage which has occurred recently in the upper districts of the North Coast, where several acres of crop have been turned white by the locusts. Many of these Indians will do nothing to help themselves. With true Oriental characteristics they prefer to sit down and squabble amongst themselves over some trivialities, while the locusts are every day growing more serious.<sup>44</sup>

To complicate matters, the poison supplied by the Department killed the cane and many farmers refused to use it. Short of burning the cane, then, there was no effective way to deal with the menace.<sup>45</sup> Damage in 1934 was far greater, especially in Zululand, as good rains made for hatchings of hoppers all over Zululand, especially in areas where control measures had not been taken.<sup>46</sup> The Zululand Chamber of Commerce estimated that the cost to the industry in Zululand for 1934 alone, amounted to £1 000 000.<sup>47</sup> It was claimed that in the 1933/1934 season damage to crops had amounted to 26 per cent in Zululand and 14 per cent on the South Coast of Natal.<sup>48</sup>

Outbreaks of malaria also caused major problems for the sugar industry during the depression years.<sup>49</sup> Even before the onset of the depression, there was much debate about government plans to restrict Zululand farmers to the use of indigenous labour. Not surprisingly, these plans were met with vehement opposition from all connected with the sugar industry. While it was thought that the labour recruited

44. *SASJ*, March 1934, p. 127.

45. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", pp. 126 - 127. Burning mature cane was common practice in some areas, so this would not have resulted in hardship, but the locusts preferred immature cane.

46. For a full discussion of the locust menace, see Minnaar, *uShukela*, pp. 72 - 74.

47. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 127.

48. *Memorandum*, p. 32.

49. For a full discussion of the malaria problem during the depression years, see Minnaar, *uShukela*, pp. 80 - 86 and J B Brain, "But only we Black men die: the 1929-1933 malaria epidemics in Natal and Zululand", *Contree*, No. 27, April 1990.



from Zululand was, to an extent, resistant to malaria and should be used in the malarial zone, great difficulty was being experienced in meeting all the labour requirements from Zululand alone.<sup>50</sup> Speaking at a meeting of the Zululand Farmers' Association, Mr George Heaton Nicholls M.P. put the matter thus:

We live in a malarial country, and the recruited labour consists largely of mine rejects, who are particularly susceptible to malaria. Commonsense demands...that we should get that type of labour which does not contract malaria readily, which is largely immune, from the coastal districts of Portuguese East, [Africa — Mozambique] instead of looking to Pondoland. Everybody would be better off, and the malarial position would be infinitely better.<sup>51</sup>

Minnaar pointed out that the moves to acquire more labour from Zululand had come from within the ranks of the sugar farmers themselves, and that their complaint was that many workers who, in their view, ought to have been working in the cane-fields, were being siphoned off to the gold mines. This, they claimed, necessitated the use of other sources of labour.<sup>52</sup> It appears that the political clout wielded by Heaton Nicholls was sufficient to scotch any government plans to restrict sugar farmers to Zulu labour alone;<sup>53</sup> the *quid pro quo* appears to have been that sugar farmers would not oppose continued recruiting for the gold mines. Minnaar points out that key districts in Zululand only became "closed" to outside recruiting in 1935.<sup>54</sup>

The spread of malaria posed a major health hazard for everyone connected with the industry, and attempts had to be made to eradicate the disease or minimise its

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50. Jeeves argued that this attempt was partially aimed at providing work for the unemployed of Zululand, but that the lobbying of Heaton Nicholls to retain the status quo i.e. the employment of Pondo and Basotho workers, was so effective that these plans all came to nothing. A Jeeves, "Sugar and Gold in the making of the South African Labour System: the Crisis of Supply on the Zululand Sugar Estates, 1906 - 1939", *South African Journal of Economic History*, 1992, Vol. 7, No. 2.

51. *SASJ*, December 1931, pp. 769 - 771.

52. A Minnaar, "Labour Supply Problems of the Zululand Sugar Planters, 1905 - 1939", *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, Vol. 12, 1989, pp. 64 - 71.

53. See discussion below, pp. 264 - 265.

54. Minnaar, "Labour Supply", p. 67.

effects on production.<sup>55</sup> Mr C W Dent highlighted this in his evidence to the Native Economic Commission:

In parts of the Reserves, whole families have been struck down, and the mortality has been severe. Apart from the health point of view of the natives concerned, its affects [*sic*] on the labour supply is most serious. Labourers are unable to turn out to work, or else not able to perform their tasks efficiently. This in turn raises the costs of labour to the employer.<sup>56</sup>

Campaigns were launched to eradicate the threat, but the lack of resources and the many breeding waters open to mosquito infestation, made this a well-nigh impossible task. The situation with regard to malaria became very serious in 1932 and 1933, when reports were received of thousands of Africans dying of the disease in Zululand.<sup>57</sup> The situation was somewhat alleviated by the drought, which dried up breeding places and so inhibited the spread of the disease-carrying mosquitoes.<sup>58</sup> Farmers bore the expenses of the anti-malarial campaign, which included spraying and the clearing of surface water.<sup>59</sup> Farmers came to resent the fact that little was done in the reserves, which formed their labour reservoir, and that this negated their efforts.<sup>60</sup>

While struggling to contend with all these natural impediments to profitable agriculture, sugar farmers also had to contend with the effects of the Hertzog government's decision to remain on the gold standard. As the sugar industry had

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- 55. R G T Watson, *Tongaati: An African Experiment*, Hutchinson, London, 1960, pp. 151 - 153.
  - 56. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Cecil William Dent, Empangeni, 26 September 1930, p. 1816.
  - 57. SASJ, April 1932, p. 201. Mention was made here of widespread cases in Umvoti and the Tugela region. The epidemic in the Empangeni area was described as "...the worst ever". At a meeting of the Zululand Farmers' Association, the President, Mr C W Dent, put the death toll as high as 7 000, although he admitted that the real total would never be known. SASJ, August 1932, p. 469.
  - 58. Report of the Empangeni Planters' Association Annual General Meeting, SASJ, August 1933, p. 449.
  - 59. The costs were estimated to run into "...tens of thousands of pounds...", *Memorandum*, 1934, p. 32.
  - 60. SASJ, July 1933, p. 389.

become more and more dependent on the international market to sell its surplus sugar, any alteration for the worse in exchange rates between the Union and Great Britain and her other dominions was bound to have an effect on the material well-being of the entire sugar industry. As early as October 1931, only a month after Great Britain left the gold standard, Heaton Nicholls<sup>61</sup> was warning of the effects on the sugar industry:

Dealing with the Sugar Industry before Great Britain left the gold standard...cargo sugar was realising £7 16s on the wharf in Durban. To-day, on the existing basis, we are getting only £6 6s 8d., a drop of £1 9s 10d. a ton. This is a very serious position indeed for all engaged in sugar production.<sup>62</sup>

As the crisis dragged on, the position of the sugar industry on the international market worsened. This was especially so as many countries which had strong trading ties with Great Britain, including Canada, had followed Britain off gold. In a strongly worded editorial, the *SASJ* had this to say:

The strongest evidence in favour of South Africa going off gold is afforded by the example of New Zealand, a country that has built an exceptional prosperity spread over a large number of years, solely upon her primary products, particularly dairy produce, meat and wool, which she has supplied to Great Britain. There is no doubt that she has gone off the Gold Standard entirely with the object of retaining and safeguarding these markets for her produce. In spite of our position in South Africa and all our attempts to cut away from Great Britain, and our German treaties, and our Ministers plenipotentiary in certain countries of the world, even the backveld Dutchman has come to admit that Great Britain is by far our best customer, and she is also our best friend, inasmuch as we owe her four hundred millions of money loaned to us to develop our country. By remaining on the Gold Standard we may preserve that egg-shell of economic independence so dear to the heart of the man nursing the wounds he received in the Boer War, a matter of thirty years ago, but if persevered in it will result in the people of this country taking in one another's washing in order to make a living. Everybody, from the clerk in the city office to the backveld mielie grower and the man in the counting house is perfectly satisfied, after four months' experience, that the state of the country through clinging to

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61. Minnaar suggests that Nicholls was behind much of the agitation against the Gold Standard among sugar planters. See Minnaar, "The Farmers and the Gold Standard Crisis", p. 138.

62. *SASJ*, October 1931, p. 675.

gold must become catastrophic. Most of the primary producers who cannot sell their products, are already on the verge of starvation, while there is hardly a man in the whole country who has not suffered more or less deeply, and this after only four months' experience. The length to which the government has gone with its ingenious legislation to bolster up the position and throw dust in the eyes of the people of the country would be pitiable if it were not so tragic in its conclusions.<sup>63</sup>

The "ingenious legislation" to which this editorial referred was the Export Subsidies Act, whereby the government imposed a surcharge of 5 per cent on all imports, using the proceeds (and additional monies voted by Parliament) to pay exporters a 10 per cent bounty on the value of their products, in an attempt to reduce the effect of the disparity between the South African pound and sterling. Such bounties were not paid in respect of gold, diamonds and strangely, sugar.<sup>64</sup> Possibly the government considered that the sugar industry was already in receipt of sufficient government assistance, in the form of protective tariffs, but perhaps it is worth considering that such editorials might have had the effect of hardening attitudes in Pretoria.<sup>65</sup>

The ultimate cost to the industry of the government's gold standard policy was put at £540 000, but declining prices made this assessment appear conservative.<sup>66</sup> However, upon review, the cost to the industry was estimated at £481 000, of which the members of the Cane Growers' Association had to bear £123 245.<sup>67</sup> These losses need to be put into perspective. What must be realised is that many of the farmers engaged in the growing of cane could be termed "small producers" as the following table illustrates:

**Table 5.3**  
**Production of Cane by White Growers, 1932-1933.**

Number	Category	Average
79	Less than 500 tons	218 tons
69	500 - 1 000 tons	738 tons
93	1 000 - 2 000 tons	1 495 tons
89	2 000 - 3 000 tons	2 498 tons
69	3 000 - 4 000 tons	3 478 tons
37	4 000 - 5 000 tons	4 548 tons
41	5 000 - 6 000 tons	5 400 tons
17	6 000 - 7 000 tons	6 489 tons
18	7 000 - 8 000 tons	7 517 tons
6	8 000 - 9 000 tons	8 629 tons
9	9 000 - 10 000 tons	9 296 tons
25	over 10 000 tons	14 055 tons

Source: *Memorandum*, p. 46.

With the price of cane at the mills being in the region of 13s per ton, it is obvious that some farmers must have been growing cane as a sideline, for the returns they were receiving, once production costs had been deducted, were insufficient to make any kind of a living. Secondly, it must also be obvious that many farmers whose sole source of income was the growing of cane, were perilously close to the bread-line, if not under it.<sup>68</sup>

...the growing of cane is certainly not an economic proposition for the small planter, the marginal grower having to harvest at least 5 000 tons of cane per annum to cover his overhead expenses. On this basis it is clear that there are many small farmers who, failing a marked improvement in returns, are bound to go under.<sup>69</sup>

This made the position of most Indian and African planters even more precarious, as their average output was well below the figure quoted by Barnett. Yet the numbers of Indians and Africans engaged in the planting of cane showed an upward tendency throughout the depression years.

**Table 5.4**  
**Output of Indian and African Cane Growers,**  
**1928-29 to 1933-34**

Year	No.	Indians Tons	Average	No.	Africans Tons	Average
1928-29	505	143 956	285	583	41 038	71
1929-30	530	169 886	320	585	33 014	56
1930-31	625	222 839	356	711	52 858	74
1931-32	635	183 370	289	806	52 073	64
1932-33	694	218 079	314	710	46 411	65
1933-34	677	223 055	329	878	52 623	60

**Source:** *Memorandum*, p. 52.

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63. *SASJ*, January 1932, pp. 3 - 5.

64. *Ibid*, p. 5; Barnett, "Natal Sugar Industry", p. 77.

65. There is no direct evidence one way or the other, but it is worth noting that by October 1932, the *Journal* was singing a different tune, pointing out that while the sugar industry was indeed losing heavily, the local cost of living had gone down. "We have come to the conclusion that there is no definite right and wrong about the gold standard." Editorial, *SASJ*, October 1932, p. 539.

66. Annual Report of Sir J L Hulett and Sons, reprinted in the *SASJ*, January 1933, p. 39.

Interestingly, while the number of Africans engaged in growing cane increased, their output remained largely static. The growing of cane by Indians and Africans, although their combined output was only approximately 9 per cent of the total cane crushed each year,<sup>70</sup> was resisted by white growers and millers.<sup>71</sup>

Another feature of the depression years was the growth in the miller-cum-planter estates. This situation arose chiefly because of a shortage of capital on the part of small growers. When the depression and the drought struck, many small planters who had insufficient capital to tide them over, turned to financial institutions for assistance. The Land Bank found itself inundated with requests from farmers throughout the Union and could not hope to supply all their needs with its limited capital. The following table indicates that commercial farmers in Natal were heavily in debt and used Land Bank credit to pay these debts during the depression years.

**Table 5.5**  
**Land Bank Credit : Purposes of Loans granted, 1928 - 1934**  
**(in percentages)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Purchase of stock</b>	<b>Improve- ments</b>	<b>Payment of debt</b>	<b>Purchase of land</b>	<b>Total</b>
1928	7,6	4,8	38,9	48,7	168 570
1929	7,6	12,0	40,4	40,0	129 840
1930	9,5	11,4	47,6	31,4	152 085
1931	3,8	5,6	77,9	12,5	262 525
1932	0,5	2,0	85,9	11,5	212 420
1933	0,6	0,8	78,7	19,8	160 335
1934	1,1	2,1	86,0	10,4	362 410

**Source:** Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, p. 119.

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67. *South African Sugar Year Book and Directory*, 1934, p. 102.

68. *Memorandum*, p. 46 and p. 82.

69. Barnett, "Natal Sugar Industry", p. 35.

70. *Memorandum*, p. 52.

71. *SASJ*, January 1929, p. 9. There were reports of "Native Cane" being rejected at several mills throughout Natal and Zululand. This will be dealt with in greater detail in the following chapter.

Due to a host of factors, the Land Bank decided to limit its involvement in the sugar industry.<sup>72</sup> Other financial institutions followed this lead and so for many small planters the only possible source of additional capital was to borrow money from millers, with whom they had, or were to have, a close working arrangement. In some cases, loans were made by millers to farmers planting cane for the first time. In the face of all the factors which militated against successful cane farming at this time, many planters found themselves in the unhappy position of having to surrender their farms to the millers.<sup>73</sup> There were only nineteen mills operating in Natal and Zululand, "...controlling between them all the resources of the entire industry".<sup>74</sup>

Nowhere is this growth in the miller-cum-planter sector more clearly illustrated than in the following table:

**Table 5.6**  
**Comparison of Cane tonnages produced: Planters and Millers-cum-planters, 1926/27 to 1933/34**

Years	Planters	Millers-cum-planters
1926-27	1 486 000	660 000
1927-28	1 760 000	717 000
1928-29	2 070 000	808 000
1929-30	2 060 000	942 000
1930-31	1 665 000	1 126 000
1931-32	1 994 000	1 129 000
1932-33	2 194 000	1 288 000
1933-34	2 274 000	1 391 000
Increases 1926-27 / 1933-34	788 000	731 000
Percentage Increase	53%	110%

**Source: Adapted from *Memorandum*, p. 48.**

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72. See Barnett, "The Natal Sugar Industry", p. 102.

73. *Ibid.*, pp. 142 - 144.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

During the worst period of the depression years, while the production of the planters fluctuated before resuming its upward trend, that of the millers-cum-planters continued to grow at a fairly rapid pace.<sup>75</sup> However, it must be borne in mind that the more sugar was produced, the more had to be exported, often at a loss, which naturally affected the profit margins of the millers-cum-planters.

The movement of white farmers off the land was a cause of concern for the Government, for it created further unemployment. The introduction of a quota system in 1935 and the Sugar Act, No. 28 of 1936, were partially aimed at halting this attrition, for it would be pointless for companies to acquire additional lands when their quota had been met.<sup>76</sup> Pressure was exerted on the whole industry to retain as many whites in full employment as possible, or to provide employment for whites.<sup>77</sup>

The factory side of the Industry has also responded to the requests of Ministers made of recent years, to increase the scope of European labour. One mill has, since 1931, increased its white labour staff by 51. Another, during the period 1932-34 employed a further 60 Europeans. Whatever extra expense this has involved has been regarded as a contribution to the solution of the problem of European unemployment. Other mills have done their best in this regard. Since 1925 the Europeans employed on the industrial side have increased by 56 per cent., although some of this increase is no doubt due to increased output.<sup>78</sup>

Doornkop Sugar Estate, having been loaned a vast sum of taxpayer's money,<sup>79</sup> began to employ whites as cane-cutters in May 1932. In addressing a meeting of the unemployed in Durban, Mr Rosenberg, the Managing Director said:

...the whole of the cane in Australia is cut by Europeans, who do on an average from five to six times as much work per day as our average Native, there is no reason why the experiment

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75. Behrmann argues that millers-cum-planters were in a far stronger financial position than the planters, as they controlled the prices paid to planters and were advantaging themselves at the expense of the planters. Behrmann, "Economics", p. 34 and p. 69. See also Lincoln, "Culture", p. 75.

76. Barnett, "The Natal Sugar Industry", pp. 144 -145 and Behrmann, "Economics", p. 35.

77. Watson, *Tongaati*, p. 159.

78. *Memorandum*, p. 60.

79. *SASJ*, February 1929, p. 77. The total sum involved was in the region of £160 000.



should not be a success and bring relief to many of the young strong men who cannot find employment in the towns.<sup>80</sup>

It has already been shown that growers of cane increased their output during the depression in an effort to boost their incomes. Another measure adopted by the growers was to attempt to cut their production costs, chief of which was labour. It was obvious that such a reduction of wages could not be made by individual planters, for labour would simply move to higher-paying farms in the district. Through the Farmers' Associations, representing organised white agriculture, decisions were taken to reduce wages of field workers. Citing the "...present parlous state of the Sugar Industry and how it reacted on them as Cane Growers...", the wages of field workers were reduced to 30s per 30-shift ticket, with rations, while *togt* labour was to receive 10d per day without rations.<sup>81</sup> Whether farmers were sincere or not in their protestations of not "...having a hit at the underdog...", it is clear that the depressed economy was having a serious effect on the African population. It was said that "...Natives were begging for work at any rate of pay in order to get food". It was claimed that African labour had been consulted and had agreed to the reduction, as an alternative to being retrenched.<sup>82</sup> Wages were reduced throughout the sugar growing region, although the availability of labour often determined the extent of such reductions.<sup>83</sup>

It is clear that the major agricultural pursuit among white farmers, sugar farming, did indeed suffer greatly during the depression years. However, it is also clear that the reverses the industry suffered could have been a great deal worse, had not the Union government protected the industry's access to local markets. Neither is there any doubt that the depression had a long-term beneficial effect in that it forced the

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80. *SASJ*, May 1932, p. 277.

81. *SASJ*, October 1931, p. 653. At the meeting of the Victoria County Farmers' Association held at Umhlali on 19 October 1931, George Hulett had suggested 25s per 30-ticket shift with rations, with 10d without rations for *togt* labour. The former was considered to be too drastic and was amended to the figure given in the text.

82. *SASJ*, October 1931, p. 653. Minnaar, *uShukela*, p. 97, fn 401, incorrectly cites *SASJ* for 1920, 1922, 1923 and 1925 in support of the reduction of wages, apparently overlooking this correct reference.

83. See *SASJ*, June 1931, pp. 359 - 361 and *SASJ*, September 1932, p. 483. See also KCAL, KCM 33684, Minutes of the Dumisa and District Farmers' Association, 4 December 1931 and 9 May 1932; KCAL, KCM 30626, Minutes of the Emoyeni Planters' Association, 8 December 1932.

adoption of a stricter quota system, which restricted production and did much to stabilise the industry in later years. The new quota system, which came into effect as a result of the Sugar Act of 1936, limited production and put small growers in a far more advantageous position.<sup>84</sup>

## Wattle

Since its importation from Australia in the nineteenth century, the cultivation of wattle, mainly the black wattle, *Acacia mollissima*,<sup>85</sup> rapidly assumed a position of importance in Natal's agricultural activity. To such an extent that, in the period 1922 to 1928, the export of wattle products (bark and extract) contributed more to the Union's export trade than did sugar.<sup>86</sup> For best results, wattle requires altitudes of between 2 000 and 4 000 feet, which makes it eminently suitable for cultivation in the Midlands, specifically in the districts of Kranskop, Umvoti, New Hanover, Pietermaritzburg, Lion's River, Richmond and Camperdown. It was in these districts that wattle was first planted and, in the early decades of the twentieth century, more than half of all the wattle plantations were to be found in them. However, as wattle was such a lucrative crop, plantations were also established in the southern Midlands around Ixopo, Alfred and Port Shepstone; in Zululand; and near Paulpietersburg and Vryheid. Indeed, by 1930, plantations had also been established elsewhere in the Union, but 72,9 per cent of acreage under wattle was still to be found in Natal.<sup>87</sup>

Natal farmers in the areas most suited to wattle cultivation were relatively quick to supplement their farming incomes by planting wattle on areas of their farms which were unsuitable for other crops or livestock. The relatively high prices obtained for bark, and the seemingly assured nature of the overseas demand for wattle products,

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84. See Barnett, "Sugar Industry", pp. 110 - 134.

85. Experiments were also made with the green wattle, *Acacia decurrens* or *Acacia normalis* and with the silver wattle, *Acacia dealbata*, but these did not prove as successful. See W E Watt and Dr A J Beyleveld, "Development of the Wattle Bark Industry in South Africa: Market Prospects for the Future", *Farming in South Africa*, Vol. 8, February 1933, p. 83.

86. Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, p. 59.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 54 - 56.

made even relatively small areas of wattle appear like profitable ventures. At worst, wattle would serve to supplement the declining incomes of many farmers engaged in mixed farming.<sup>88</sup>

Wattle is grown specifically for the bark of the tree, which is rich in tannin, used in the tanning process of leather. As late as 1957, when Hurwitz was writing, it was still possible to state:

The bulk of wattle bark and extract entering international markets is produced in South Africa, with Natal as the most important area. Cultivation of wattles has been extended to Kenya, Rhodesia, and Tanganyika, with Kenya ranking next in importance to South Africa. Elsewhere, Australia and Madagascar also export small quantities of wattle bark.<sup>89</sup>

The Union was thus the world's largest supplier of wattle bark and extract for use in the global tanning industry. This is significant as there was little internal market for bark or extract. A quantity of timber was sold for use as mine props, but the major portion of the industry's products was exported. This made the industry extremely vulnerable to the fluctuations in price and demand of the international trade cycle. As the economic situation in the major importing countries such as Great Britain, Japan, Germany and the United States of America deteriorated, so the demand for wattle products began to fall and consequently, prices began to decline. From a peak of £9 5s 7d per ton of bark in 1928, prices fell to a low of £3 19s 10d in 1934. The price of extract fell just as precipitously, but at a later date. The average price per ton of extract peaked in 1930, when £17 9s 8d was realised, but this fell continuously to as low as £10 1s 2d in 1935.<sup>90</sup>

Wattle takes between six and eight years to mature, depending on soil and weather conditions. Only at maturity is the bark sufficiently high in tannin to make

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88. H. Witt, "The Development of the Timber Industry in Natal, 1910-1960: A Socio-environmental Study." Paper presented at the Seventh Biennial Conference of the Economic History Society of Southern Africa, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, July 1992.

89. Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, p. 52.

90. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 119. Minnaar provides a full table showing prices for the period 1928-1935, abstracted from Union of South Africa, *Year Books* of the relevant years.

harvesting worthwhile.<sup>91</sup> The relatively high prices which had reigned on the international market during the mid-1920s had encouraged some Natal farmers to undertake further plantings of trees which were to mature at a time when international prices were falling in the 1930s.<sup>92</sup> Obviously they could not have predicted this trend and the resulting over-production was, to an extent, offset by a dramatic increase in the export of extract. To obtain extract, the bark had to be boiled and then concentrated. The machinery required was expensive and it was not until 1916 that the Natal Tanning Extract Company was formed for this purpose.<sup>93</sup> However, as a ton of extract realised a great deal more, mass for mass, than bark, a steady increase in the quantity of extract exported was noticeable for most of the depression years.<sup>94</sup> This increase in quantity was not matched by any significant rise in returns, as Table 5.7 illustrates:

**Table 5.7**  
**Wattle Exports: 1928 - 1934**

Year	Quantity in tons		Export Value £		Average £ per ton	
	Bark	Extract	Bark	Extract	Bark	Extract
1928	85 508	10 654	793 990	181 079	£9/05/07	£16/19/11
1929	73 328	14 023	513 542	241 695	£7/00/00	£17/04/08
1930	81 809	17 601	554 095	307 799	£6/15/05	£17/09/08
1931	69 150	17 392	399 887	264 132	£5/15/07	£15/03/08
1932	63 573	20 939	227 378	215 482	£4/07/03	£10/05/09
1933	75 620	18 901	330 404	195 465	£4/07/04	£10/06/09
1934	73 747	25 708	294 534	261 022	£3/19/10	£10/03/00
1935	93 340	38 509	380 102	387 530	£4/01/04	£10/01/02

**Source:** Union of South Africa, *Year Books* for relevant years.

Even declining prices did not stop some farmers from continuing to plant wattle in the early years of the depression.<sup>95</sup> This should not be seen as surprising, as it was often a "knee-jerk" reaction of farmers to try and counteract the effects of declining

91. Dr I J Craib, "Wattle Production in the Union", in *Farming in South Africa*, Vol. 8, November 1933, p. 426.

92. Watt and Beyleveld, "Development of the Wattle Bark Industry", p. 83.

93. H Shaw, "The Wattle Industry", in *Agriculture in Natal: Recent Developments*, being Vol. 13 of the Natal Regional Survey, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1957, pp. 67 - 68.

94. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 119.

95. *The Farmer*, 24 October 1930, p. 42.

income by boosting production, either through better cultivation of existing lands, or by putting more land under the plough. Even the mouthpiece of the Department of Agriculture gave this sort of advice to farmers.<sup>96</sup>

The consequence of this drive by farmers to increase their yields often meant that pressure was applied to the lands of African workers on the farms. Many farms, especially in the northern districts of Natal, still operated on the basis of labour tenancy arrangements, whereby African workers were allotted small portions of the white farmer's land on which to establish their kraals, run their livestock and grow their crops, in return for a specified period of labour service during the year.<sup>97</sup> Often small cash payments, or wages in kind supplemented the incomes of the workers. To many wattle farmers, land was too valuable in terms of possible future income to allow its continued occupation by workers and their families, who were simply "wasting" it.<sup>98</sup> Many tenants were therefore turned off.<sup>99</sup> The numbers of other workers were also reduced to cut costs. The measures adopted were fairly universal throughout the farming community of the province during the depression years and will be discussed in detail below.

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96. Message from Mr C H Olivier, President of the South African Agricultural Union, *Farming in South Africa*, Vol. 5, May 1930, p. 49: "Prices for all our products are low; therefore we should endeavour to reduce the cost of production by increasing the production per morgen or per animal..." It is worth noting that in the same journal some months later, a totally different approach was advocated by Mr Naudé and Dr Beyleveld: "The farmer is often advised that in order to maintain his income in these days of depression as near as possible to what it was before such depression set in, he should increase his production...this is fallacious reasoning, and would, if acted upon, land the farmers in a worse plight than they were before." J S P Naudé and A J Beyleveld, "Agriculture and the Depression", *Farming in South Africa*, Vol. 5, August 1930, p. 197.
97. Further detailed discussion of this system and the way in which white farmers were able to manipulate it will be given below. See also Lacey, *Boroko*, pp. 120 - 181.
98. Bradford, *Struggle*, p. 281.
99. *Ibid.*, p. 170. The Natal Tanning Extract Company bought in the region of 30 000 acres and turned all existing tenants off the land. See also as examples the following evidence led before the Native Economic Commission of 1930/32: CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Headman Lugubu Mbata, Pietermaritzburg, 8 April 1931, p. 6531; CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Colonel F E Foxon and Mr F Pope-Ellis, Pietermaritzburg, 9 April 1931, p. 6620; CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Mr Frederick Rodseth (Superintendent of Native Reserves and Inspector of Native Labourers for S. Zululand), Eshowe, 30 September 1930, p. 1945; CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Chief Josiah Mqwebu, Stanger, 2 October 1930, p. 2039; CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Richard Ngidi, Bulwer, 10 October 1930, p. 2256.

The Hertzog government was made aware of the negative effects on the wattle industry of its decision to remain on the gold standard when Britain left it in 1931.<sup>100</sup> This awareness, coupled with the failing fortunes of the industry, prompted the government to respond with an export subsidy. The industry was almost wholly dependent on overseas markets and, because the export of wattle products earned the Union valuable foreign exchange, the export of both wattle bark and extract was subsidised under the Export Subsidies Act of 1931, at a rate of 10 per cent, this later being increased to 25 per cent.<sup>101</sup> A sum of £68 380 was thus paid in 1932, £52 994 in 1933 and £75 207 in 1934.<sup>102</sup> This served to assist farmers in surviving the depression and offset, to some extent, the fluctuation in returns occasioned by the disparity between the South African pound and sterling. Yet even the measure of relief this afforded wattle growers was considered either inadequate<sup>103</sup> or foolish.<sup>104</sup> Generally, however, the wattle growers did not suffer nearly as badly as other agricultural sectors in the province, their plantations not being as affected by the drought or by insect pests and diseases.

## Maize

In both volume and value, maize was without question the Union's most important agricultural crop.<sup>105</sup> It was also the staple food of a large section of the population, making it the most important commodity on the internal market. Furthermore, after the mid-1920s the Union generally produced far more maize than was required, the

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100. The effects of the gold standard issue will be discussed below.

101. NAU, Minutes of the Executive Meeting of 28 April 1932.

102. Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, p. 59.

103. KCAL, KCM 30035, Annual Resolutions passed at Natal Agricultural Union Congresses, No. 16 of 26/27 April 1932. "That in the opinion of this Congress the subsidy on Wattle Bark should be increased from 10 per cent to 25 per cent owing to the present extremely low price of bark."

104. See letters to the editor from "The Stroller" and "Sucrose" in *The Farmer*, 13 November 1931, p. 30. In the latter, the writer alleged that it was a case of "Robbing Peter to pay Paul". See also an editorial in the same journal, 15 January 1932, p. 15, where export subsidies are termed "...financial jugglery for which it is hard to find justification".

105. G Gianino, "An Analysis of Farm Supply Response with special reference to Maize Production in South Africa," M.Sc. (Agric. Econ.) thesis, University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), 1979, p. 1. The production of maize far exceeded the production of all other cereal crops combined. A R Saunders, *Maize in South Africa*, CNA, Johannesburg, 1930, p. 28.

balance being exported onto a volatile world market. It was from Natal that the first significant quantity of maize was exported to Great Britain in 1906/07. Shortages of maize and other grains after the First World War greatly stimulated production in the Union. Production in the other provinces soon far outstripped that of Natal. It must be stressed that this increased production elsewhere in the Union was almost entirely with a view to export, as the internal market remained rather static.<sup>106</sup> A wave of propaganda suggesting that the Union could become a great maize-producing nation also greatly stimulated planting,<sup>107</sup> particularly in certain districts of the Transvaal and Orange Free State, which concentrated on producing maize as a "cash crop" with no attempt at diversification. By the 1920s and 1930s, this area, known as the "maize triangle", produced 82,3 per cent of all the maize grown annually on white farms in the Union. By comparison, production of maize on white farms in Natal was very small, accounting for only 12,2 per cent of the total Union production.<sup>108</sup> However, maize was Natal's most important field crop, after sugar and wattle, accounting for 82,5 per cent of all other crops planted in the province.<sup>109</sup> In 1930, 214 000 morgen were planted to maize in Natal.<sup>110</sup>

**Table 5.8**  
**Maize Yields, Natal and the Union, 1927 - 1934**  
**(In 200 lb. bags)**

Year	Union	Natal	Natal as per cent
1927	13 976 000	1 928 000	15,2
1928	15 075 000	1 389 000	9,2
1929	13 876 000	1 545 000	11,1
1930	17 261 000	1 669 000	9,7
1931	12 654 000	989 000	7,8
1932	15 320 000	1 123 000	7,3
1933	5 980 000	906 000	15,2
1934	18 547 000	1 631 000	8,8

**Source:** *Handbook*, p. 52.

106. W J Lamont, *A Review of the Maize Situation*, Department of Agriculture, Economic series No. 15, Bulletin No. 101, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1931, p. 6.

107. P W Vorster, "The Maize Industry", *Farming in South Africa*, Vol. 27, March 1952, p. 173. Vorster points out that this all came to naught.

108. Lamont, *Maize Situation*, p. 5.

109. I J Smuts, "Field crop Production", in *Agriculture in Natal: Recent Developments*, p. 96 and p. 102. Maize occupies almost twice the area occupied by all other crops excluding sugar-cane.

110. Union of South Africa, Department of Agricultural Economics and Marketing, *Handbook of*



Maize in Natal is grown largely in the Midlands and in the northern districts, where the climate and soil types are suitable for its cultivation. While much of the coastal region is also suitable, the crop gradually became less and less important in this region because of competition from sugar-cane and because of the incidence of streak, a virulent viral disease which thrives in high humidity. Some maize was grown in the coastal region by Indian market-gardeners in the 1920s and 1930s, but the quantities were insignificant.<sup>111</sup>

The most important maize-growing districts in Natal in the early decades of this century were: Estcourt, Klip River, Vryheid, Utrecht, Ixopo, New Hanover, Msinga, Newcastle and Dundee, which between them produced 63 per cent of all the maize grown in the province. Generally maize was the only crop grown in these areas, although not the only agricultural activity, as the growing of maize usually went together with animal husbandry, chiefly cattle farming.<sup>112</sup> Maize was used to supplement the diet of cattle, to increase yields of both meat and milk. Despite the fact that maize farms in Natal were generally smaller than elsewhere in the Union,<sup>113</sup> the average yield per morgen was almost double that of the rest of the Union, largely due to suitable climatic conditions.<sup>114</sup> Yet there were many areas in which maize was planted simply for the lack of an alternative food crop, sometimes with disastrous results:

Much of the land which is to-day planted to maize in Natal had perhaps more profitably been left unworked or put down to permanent pasture, for erosion is a problem of the greatest seriousness. Erosion by water is an almost universal difficulty throughout Natal, but in the northern parts a great deal of damage is also done by wind erosion.<sup>115</sup>

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*Agricultural Statistics, 1904 - 1950*, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1960/61, Table 36, p. 52. Hereafter referred to as *Handbook*.

111. Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, p. 65.

112. *Ibid.*, p. 66; see also D J R McWhirter, "Agriculture in Natal : An Outline based largely on the Census", Agric. Economics III Long Essay, University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), 1951, p. 55.

113. Saunders, *Maize*, p. 40.

114. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

115. *Ibid.*, p. 41.



Much of the maize grown on Natal farms was actually retained on the producing farms. In 1933, 42,7 per cent (or 697 000 bags of 200 lb.) of maize produced on Natal farms never left those farms, and figures for the years following show an even greater retention factor.<sup>116</sup> Maize grown in Natal that was sold, was generally sold locally, much of it to Africans in the reserves of Natal and Zululand. This may seem strange, as maize had become a very important crop among African subsistence farmers, but the overcrowded conditions in some of the reserves, coupled with poor farming techniques, soil erosion and exhaustion, drought and a growing population, meant that Africans often had to buy maize to survive.<sup>117</sup> Very little maize grown in Natal left the province; most was consumed locally, as food for labour or for cattle.<sup>118</sup> It should also be noted that Africans on white farms produced considerable quantities of maize for their own consumption. As part of their labour tenancy agreements, many Africans were allocated a portion of land on which to grow crops to sustain themselves. The produce was almost entirely consumed on the farm.

**Table 5.9**  
**Maize Produced by Africans on White Farms, 1927 - 1934.**  
**(In 200 lb. bags)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Quantity</b>
1927	249 000
1928	205 000
1929	185 000
1930	213 000
1931	126 000
1932	144 000
1933	116 000
1934	253 000

**Source:** *Handbook*, p. 53.

Viewed collectively, all these factors distinguished maize-growing in Natal from maize-growing elsewhere in the Union, and made Natal's maize farmers far less

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116. Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, p. 67 and McWhirter, "Agriculture", p. 60. Unfortunately, no figures are available prior to this year.

117. *The Farmer*, 2 August 1929, p. 31.

118. NAU, Minutes of Executive Meeting, 28 September 1928.

vulnerable to the vicissitudes of falling prices and fluctuations in production overseas. Yet Natal's maize farmers could not entirely escape the effects of the depression and drought, as maize prices on the local market were naturally responsive to conditions both elsewhere in the Union and abroad. As the price on the Union market declined, largely in response to export-related factors, so the prices in Natal also plummeted.

The Union was one of the smaller maize-exporting countries; production in Argentina, the United States of America, the Danubian states and Russia far outstripped that of the Union and the international market price obviously depended on the production of these countries. The biggest international consumers of maize were Great Britain, Italy, France, Brazil, India, Egypt and the Dutch East Indies. Their levels of consumption also greatly influenced the prices on the international market.<sup>119</sup> Until 1929, the world price of maize was such that maize farming for export was relatively remunerative. As suggested above, the export of maize was encouraged by the Union government, as it brought in valuable foreign exchange.<sup>120</sup> In 1930 the Union's maize surplus had risen to approximately 12,5 million 200 lb. bags, which forced prices down from 13s 7d per bag in 1929 to 6s 5d in June 1930.<sup>121</sup> Vorster described the situation in the following terms:

When in 1930 the world depression set in, the maize industry was largely dependent upon the export market and when prices slumped overseas, the maize farmers were very hard hit. There was a similar drop in local prices — so much so that the maize producers were faced with financial ruin. For thousands of farmers maize constituted the most important source of income. They could not fall back on the cultivation of other crops. Using maize as animal feed brought no solution either, because the prices of animal products were just as low and exportation resulted in a loss. Moreover, radical change cannot be effected in any farming system overnight. The then Government was obliged to take direct action in order to save thousands of farmers from ruin.<sup>122</sup>

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119. Lamont, *Maize Situation*, p. 9.

120. Vorster, "Maize", p. 175. For more on the "alliance between gold and maize", see D O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1934-1948*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983.

121. *Farming in South Africa*, March 1930, p. 602; November 1930, pp. 366, 371.

122. Vorster, "Maize", p. 175.

This deteriorating situation had prompted a mass meeting of maize farmers in the Transvaal to demand government assistance, which was not forthcoming in the form demanded, the government being unwilling to directly subsidise farmers. However, the situation deteriorated even further during the rest of 1930 and by early 1931, with world production again at record levels, the situation of the Union's maize farmers was becoming very parlous indeed as the export price of maize had fallen to only 3s 6d per bag.<sup>123</sup>

Finally forced into action, the government passed the Mealie Control Act, No. 39 of 1931 (later amended by Act No. 23 of 1932), which brought some relief in the form of guaranteed payments to maize co-operatives, effectively subsidising the local price indirectly to a level higher than the export price.<sup>124</sup> It also endeavoured to force every maize dealer to set aside some portion of maize for export, thus spreading the losses. By removing the surplus, the government was able to force the local price up, but hard times in the industry forced some dealers to unload their hoarded stocks, greatly depressing prices. By 1932, the price had fallen to 5s 9d per bag on the local market, while only 2s 9d per bag could be obtained on the export market.<sup>125</sup>

The drought of 1932/33 exacerbated farmers' financial problems, but it did somewhat alleviate the problem of exporting at a loss. In fact, the internal price rose significantly, as the government bought up some of the surplus, selling it at cost to farmers in the drought-ravaged areas of the country.<sup>126</sup> Maize was also subsidized under the Export Subsidies Act and this offset the negative effects of the exchange disparity between the Union and Great Britain. This, and other government measures like the writing off of £526 666 of debt incurred by maize co-operatives, meant that maize exporters and the South African taxpayer suffered

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123. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 87.

124. *Ibid.*, p. 89. Similar legislation was also passed in the then Southern Rhodesia. See C F Keyter, *Maize Control in Southern Rhodesia 1931-1941: The African Contribution to White Survival*, The Central African Historical Association, Local Series No. 34, Salisbury (Harare), 1978.

125. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 91.

126. *Ibid.*

severe losses during the depression period.<sup>127</sup>

The significance of the above for maize farmers in Natal lies in the fact that at a time when agricultural prices for most commodities were declining, they were not able to supplement their incomes to any significant extent by producing maize; the production costs of maize, estimated at 7s per bag, were often far higher than the prices obtainable on the local or export markets.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, because of the nature of maize farming in Natal, farmers did not directly benefit from the assistance granted to agricultural co-operatives elsewhere in the country.<sup>129</sup> It follows that even those farmers who were growing maize to feed either their labour or their livestock, were doing so at a loss during the depression period. Even the weather turned against the farmers in Natal. In 1931 a devastating drought in the Vryheid district, and the rest of Northern Natal, drastically reduced maize production. The Vryheid district normally produced over a million bags a year. As a result of the drought, the estimated harvest was only 30 000 bags.<sup>130</sup> The only way in which maize could be turned to real profit was to hoard it until it was scarce and then sell it at high prices to Africans desperate for food. This appears to have been uncommon, though not unknown, especially in areas bordering the reserves.<sup>131</sup>

Natal maize farmers, like their counterparts in other areas of farming, also sought to relieve themselves of the burden of the depression by reducing their labour costs. Wages were reduced without, it appears, causing too much disruption to production. Wages in the Umlaas Road area, for example, were reduced from 1s to 9d per day for "mielie pickers", but it was reported that despite this "...a good supply of labour"

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127. A Minnaar, "The South African Maize Industry's Response to the Great Depression and the Beginnings of Large-scale State Intervention, 1929-1934", *South African Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1989, p. 75.

128. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 93. It must be admitted that some farmers could achieve higher prices by selling their crop to Africans in the reserves but generally, the storekeepers made the exorbitant profits, not the farmers. See Chapter Six.

129. Lamont, *Maize Situation*, p. 13.

130. *The Farmer*, 5 June 1931, p. 32.

131. CAD, NEC, K26, F14, Written statement of evidence submitted by the Revd Dr John Dube, Durban, 30 March 1931, p. 6.

was obtained.<sup>132</sup>

### Market-Gardening

Intensive market-gardening was carried out in the urban and peri-urban areas of the major centres, largely by Indian farmers.<sup>133</sup> Having few other outlets for their accumulated capital, as Indian penetration into the commercial sphere was heavily resisted, those Indians invested heavily in land, largely for the purpose of market-gardening.<sup>134</sup> Limited suitable land drove prices upwards and some white farmers sold off subdivisions of their farms at a considerable profit.<sup>135</sup> The less fortunate Indians leased their land on a monthly or annual basis. This was the most common form of land tenure.<sup>136</sup>

Ever-rising land costs made market-gardening less and less profitable in the twentieth century, and the precarious position of Indian market-gardeners was aggravated by a prevalent anti-Asiatic feeling.<sup>137</sup> White farmers resisted Indian penetration into the agricultural sphere with as much vehemence as the white business community resisted their acquisition of businesses in the major urban centres. Just two examples illustrate this well:

That the action of the Executive of the Natal Agricultural Union in adopting the following resolution be confirmed by this Congress: 'That in the the opinion of this meeting of representatives of the Richmond, Byrne, Rosebank, Beaumont-Eston, Mid-Illovo, Camperdown and Umvoti Associations, the Indians in Natal receive perfectly fair treatment; that they have taken advantage of what is know[n] as the "Gentleman's Agreement" between the Government of the Union and India, which agreement has worked disadvantageously for Natal; that it would be against the

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132. *The Farmer*, 25 July 1930, p. 77.

133. Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, p. 81.

134. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 254.

135. S D le Roux, "Indian Agriculture on the North Coast of Natal: Social Aspects", M. Agric.(Agric. Extension) thesis, University of Pretoria, 1971, p. 53.

136. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 253.

137. Singh, "Effects", p. 112.

interests of white civilization in the Union to make any further concessions to Indians in regard to residence or trading. The Meeting strongly urges the Union Government to re-introduce a fair and definite measure of segregation for both residence and trading; further, in the interests of peace and security, the meeting strongly urges the Union Government to allow no concessions whatever to Indians in regard to residence or trading in Zululand and other Native territories, and also to impose by legislation definite restrictions of land purchases by Indians in Natal.<sup>138</sup>

The following year, a similar resolution was passed by the Natal Agricultural Union (NAU), in response to further complaints from member associations:

That in the opinion of this Congress, Indians in this Province should be placed on the same footing as Natives with regard to purchasing or hiring of land. That no Indian hire or purchase land in a white area in any Magisterial Division, unless permission is granted by the existing landowners and Farmers' Associations in that particular Division, such permission to be expressed at a Meeting of Landowners convened by the Resident Magistrate of the Division.<sup>139</sup>

It should not be seen as coincidental that this feeling surfaced with such vehemence during the depression years. The Union government was unwilling, at this stage, to take action and a simple "Duly Noted" reply was all that was received in response to this resolution.<sup>140</sup>

The land on which market-gardening was carried out was largely alluvial and was cultivated by the family. The produce was then either hawked around the town by means of trucks, or taken to market, where it was sold.<sup>141</sup> The chief crops were vegetables of all types, and sub-tropical fruit, particularly bananas and paw-paws, but some flowers were also grown.<sup>142</sup>

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138. KCAL, KCM 30035, NAU, Resolution No. 4, passed at Annual Congress of NAU, 26 and 27 April 1932.

139. KCAL, KCM 30035, NAU, Resolution No. 7, passed at Annual Congress of NAU, 26 and 27 April 1933.

140. NAU Records, Minutes of an Executive Meeting, 27 June 1933.

141. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 253.

142. H R Burrows, *Studies of Indian Employment in Natal*, being Vol. 11 of the *Natal Regional Survey*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1961, pp. 25 - 26.

During the depression, as prices for vegetables fell and Natal faced droughts and invasions of locusts, many Indians, particularly those farming very marginal lands, were forced to give up their land.<sup>143</sup> This trend was particularly noticeable in northern Natal and along the coast north of Durban.<sup>144</sup> Indian farmers did not receive any assistance from the Union government or from the Land Bank,<sup>145</sup> and when profitability declined, many had no alternative but to give up their land and move to the towns. However, the drought did have the effect of making vegetables and fruit scarcer, driving prices upwards, granting those farmers who had managed to remain on the land, something of a respite.<sup>146</sup> These more fortunate farmers were, however, few in number. The vast majority were very unsophisticated, largely illiterate, and maintained a very low standard of living. They were quite unable to cope with the challenges which the depression and the weather brought.<sup>147</sup> Leaving the land for the towns did not materially improve their lives as unemployment was rife and they had few marketable skills.

In many ways, the depression simply hastened a migratory pattern that pre-dated the depression. Indians throughout the Union had been becoming rapidly urbanised since early in the century; the numbers engaged in agriculture in Natal showed a marked decline, falling from 48 per cent in 1911, to 26 per cent in 1921 and to only 18 per cent in 1936.<sup>148</sup> By 1936, 66,9 per cent of all Indians in Natal lived in urban areas, whereas only 55,8 per cent had been so categorised in 1921.<sup>149</sup>

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143. Singh, "Effects", p. 112.

144. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

145. The Land Bank was restricted by law to providing loans only to white farmers. Farmers of colour were not eligible for assistance in terms of the existing legislation.

146. *Ibid.*

147. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 254.

148. H R Burrows, *Indian Life and Labour in Natal*, South African Institute of Race Relations, Johannesburg, ?1943, p. 7. This picture is clouded by the fact that Indian workers on the sugar farms of Natal were being replaced by Africans during this period, but the general trend holds good.

149. *Union Statistics for Fifty Years*, p. A-10.

## Wool

For the Union of South Africa in the early decades of this century, wool was the most important of all agricultural export commodities;<sup>150</sup> it contributed between 45 and 50 per cent of the total value of farm produce exported, even during the depression years.<sup>151</sup> The industry played a vital role in the economic life of the Union, earning valuable foreign exchange for the country. The cardinal role that wool played was recognised by the Minister of Agriculture, General H Kemp, when he said in February 1930 that the prosperity of both the largest section of the farming community and the bulk of trade in the Union, depended on the prices of wool.<sup>152</sup> The international price of wool was therefore of vital significance to farmers in the Union and it is worthwhile examining the situation prior to the depression.

Immediately after the First World War, international wool prices escalated significantly, reaching 84d per lb., before falling back to more realistic levels of 24d per lb., where they remained for much of the rest of the decade.<sup>153</sup> These relatively favourable prices had a stimulatory effect on the wool industry in the Union, as the number of woolled sheep increased from 22 303 000 in 1920, to 43 927 000 in 1930, or by 97 per cent and the quantity of wool exported also rose accordingly from 164 406 000 lb. to 295 428 000 lb. or by 80 per cent in those same years.<sup>154</sup> It follows that farmers in the Union saw wool farming as a profitable venture at this time and land prices in sheep-rearing regions throughout the Union rose accordingly; many farmers borrowed heavily, not only to buy land, but to purchase suitable breeding stock with which to improve their flocks. The indebtedness of wool farmers was to be the downfall of many, as the mortgages and loans so acquired had to be serviced, even in the worst of times.<sup>155</sup>

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150. A Minnaar, "The South African Wool Industry and the Great Depression (1929-1934)", *Kleio*, Vol. 22, 1990, p. 38.

151. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 43.

152. *Farmers' Weekly*, 19 February 1930. Quoted by Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 43.

153. *South African Merino Breeders' Journal*, April 1945.

154. *Union Statistics*, I-26 and I-5.

155. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", pp. 44 - 46.



In 1928 and 1929, a steep downward trend began and wool prices began to fall sharply on the international market, driving the local price down to only 3,5d in November 1932, considerably less than half of the estimated cost of production.<sup>156</sup> This trend continued despite the efforts of South African wool dealers to enter into agreements with Australia to withhold wool from the international market until the price increased in February 1930, and also despite attempts at withholding wool on the domestic market in January and February 1931. When Australia left the gold standard in early 1931, the position of South African wool on the international market declined still further, as the Australian currency had been devalued by 25 per cent against sterling, and buyers from the United States, Japan and Europe bought cheaper Australian wool.<sup>157</sup> Even the departure of the Union from the gold standard in late 1932, which slightly increased the competitiveness of South African wool on the British market,<sup>158</sup> failed to bring about an increase in price and it was not until 1934 that a rise in prices initiated a slow recovery of the South African wool industry. Only as late as 1948 did the value of wool exported from the Union surpass the value of wool exported in 1930.<sup>159</sup>

The Union government was well aware of the plight of the wool farmers and did endeavour to assist through export subsidies of 10 per cent and later of 25 per cent. However, the formula for the subsidy was complicated and actually did not go far enough to redress the plight of the wool farmers.<sup>160</sup> Farmers also withheld wool from the internal markets in the hope that prices would rise and at the same time increased their production, measures which were often self-defeating.<sup>161</sup>

From its origins in the mid-nineteenth century, the production of wool played a significant role in the agricultural activities of Natal. The importation of the hardy merino sheep, with its relatively high yield of wool, did much to place the industry in Natal on a firm footing. Markets for Natal wool were soon found in Great Britain and the industry became a valuable earner of foreign exchange for the colony.

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156. *Farming in South Africa*, January 1933, p. 5.

157. Minnaar, "Wool Industry", pp. 62 - 64.

158. *Ibid.*, p. 65. By November 1931, the Australian dollar had depreciated by 45 per cent against sterling, while sterling itself had depreciated by 20 per cent against the South African pound.

159. *Union Statistics*, p. I-26.

160. Minnaar, "Wool Industry", p. 65.

However, foreign competition on the international market, even in the very early years of the industry, had caused wool farmers in Natal great distress as the downward fluctuations in price often brought hardship in their wake.<sup>162</sup> This situation was only to grow worse during the first few decades of the twentieth century.

Natal was not unaffected by the great "wool boom" of the 1920s; the number of woolled sheep in the province rose from 7 191 000 in 1925/26 to 11 920 000 in 1929/30, an increase of 66 per cent.<sup>163</sup> They also faced the same problems as their counterparts in the rest of the Union and, although Natal was the smallest of all the wool-producing provinces in terms of actual production, Natal wool was highly prized:

Die Middeldistrikte het wat fyn-skoonwol betref in die ou dae groot naam verwerf. Selfs vandag nog word wol van hierdie distrikte deur die wolkoper as iets besonders beskou.<sup>164</sup>

The expansion of the dairy and wattle industries in the Natal Midlands confined the expansion of sheep farming to the northern districts, chiefly around Newcastle, Utrecht, Klip River and Vryheid; these districts containing almost 80 per cent of all woolled sheep in the province.<sup>165</sup> Studies also demonstrated that merino sheep did not do as well in the Midlands as they did in the northern districts.<sup>166</sup> However, wherever sheep were to be found in Natal, the farmers had to contend with various diseases and parasites, which caused considerable damage to flocks.<sup>167</sup>

Falling wool prices caused Natal farmers to respond in a similar fashion to their

161. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 50.

162. Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, pp. 99 - 100.

163. C T van Rensburg, *Skaapboerdery in Suid-Afrika*, Nasionale Pers, Bloemfontein, 1948, p. 11.

164. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

165. Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, p. 100.

166. van Rensburg, *Skaapboerdery*, p. 19.

167. *Ibid.* Van Rensburg argues that these problems were greater in Natal than elsewhere in the Union, largely because of the moister conditions.

counterparts elsewhere in the Union. As early as August 1929, Natal farmers were lamenting the slump in wool prices.<sup>168</sup> By October, the wool price had dropped by 30 per cent,<sup>169</sup> a trend which had the effect of drastically reducing the income of farmers. In a report from the Umvoti Farmers' Association in February 1930, it was stated that the income of farmers in the district had declined by 50 per cent. Umvoti produced about 133 tons of wool annually, which had brought in approximately £16 727, at a price of 15d per lb. By February 1930, the average price received had declined to only 10d per lb., while other costs had remained steady or had even increased.<sup>170</sup> Some still remained optimistic:

As far as the present depression was concerned, we in the Union are financially better off than any of the other dominions. The one reason is that we can produce wool cheaper than in Australia and of good quality if not better. Not including a few outstanding clips of Australia, the Union is getting the same average per lb. for her wool. Australia is today selling wool below the cost of production, owing to her expensive labour.<sup>171</sup>

As already pointed out, this optimism was misplaced. As the situation of Natal wool farmers deteriorated still further, some were thrown into despondency and despair:

Sheepfarming is a dead loss at present prices, and were it not for the sales of the natural increase of the flocks, and sidelines such as wattle, poultry and maize, no sheepfarmer would be able to survive the present depression.<sup>172</sup>

There is some evidence that farmers were indeed selling off some of their sheep to raise ready cash to meet their debts. The Mooi River Farmers' Association monthly auctions saw a significant increase in the number of sheep offered for sale, but prices had naturally fallen. In 1929, 11 838 sheep had realised £13 737, while 13 521 sheep had only realised £12 204 in September 1930.<sup>173</sup>

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168. *The Farmer*, 23 August 1929, p. 20.

169. *The Farmer*, 25 October 1930, p. 37.

170. *The Farmer*, 14 February 1930, p. 36.

171. *The Farmer*, 21 March 1930, p. 17.

172. *The Farmer*, 7 November 1930, p. 40.

173. *The Farmer*, 3 October 1930, p. 42.

In addition, Natal farmers who had been sending wool to auction at other Union ports, appeared to prefer to ship wool from Durban, probably to save transport costs and in an effort to obtain the best price.<sup>174</sup> It was the issue of the gold standard, however, which really disturbed Natal wool farmers. Just a few days after Great Britain had abandoned the gold standard, the wool farmers of East Griqualand were urging the government also to abandon gold.<sup>175</sup> Some had expected the price of wool to rise to compensate for the loss on the rate of exchange, but this had not materialised.<sup>176</sup> By December 1931, the Natal Agricultural Union (NAU) had approached the Minister of Finance about the situation of all primary producers, but had received a negative reply to suggestions of abandonment. Farmers' Associations across Natal began to hold meetings to discuss the gold standard.<sup>177</sup> The NAU abandoned its apolitical stance on the issue, saying that it was "...now a national problem", for the government's policy was having a "crippling effect" on farming.<sup>178</sup> This summation was echoed in a letter to the editor of *The Farmer* from Mr C K Aveling, Chairman of the Upper Klip River Wool Growers' Association:

The people are getting desperate, and it will be no use to anyone if civilisation breaks down. While there is yet time the state should save the ship, for it is today a case of swim or sink,[sic] particularly with regard to debt recovery, which will

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174. This becomes apparent from an examination of the data provided in Union of South Africa, Department of Agriculture, Division of Economics and Marketing, *Statistical Wool and Mohair Bulletin*, Bulletin No. 139, Government Printer, Pretoria, 1935.
175. Report of a meeting of the East Griqualand Wool Growers' Association, *The Farmer*, 16 October 1931, p. 1. *The Farmer* did much to try and point out that the journal was "not political", but as will be demonstrated, the issue became so pressing that many reports of anti-gold-standard meetings were published.
176. *The Farmer*, 30 October 1930, p. 34.
177. See the following for just a few examples: KCAL, KCM 30990, Minutes of the Cedarville and Mveyane Farmers' Association Meeting held on 5 February 1932; KCAL, KCM 33680, Minutes of the Executive Meeting of the Besters Farmers' Association, 15 January 1932; KCAL, KCM 33684 Minutes of Meetings of the Dumisa and District Farmers' Association, 4 December 1931 and 8 January 1932; KCAL, KCM 33647, Minutes of a Meeting of the Richmond Farmers' Association, 5 May 1931 and Annual General Meeting, 12 January 1932. See also Minnaar, "The Farmers and the Gold Standard Crisis", pp. 117 - 126.
178. *The Farmer*, 1 January 1932, p. 30.

sweep the white man off the land. Failing this, civilisation will be wrecked in South Africa beyond all likelihood of recovery...Unrest and disgust with the existing financial system under which men are groaning, is spreading everywhere and the position must be carefully handled or there will be an upheaval...<sup>179</sup>

Equally strident was the resolution of the Hammarsdale and District Farmers' Association conveyed by the secretary, Mr W P Purdon, to the Prime Minister :

That for the sake of the prosperity, nay the very life of the farming community of the Union of South Africa, the Government be called upon to go off the Gold Standard without further delay and link up with sterling.<sup>180</sup>

Some Natal wool farmers had even pressurised their Members of Parliament to become involved. J S Marwick wrote to Hertzog at the behest of the Polela Wool Growers' Association urging the government to abandon the gold standard in order to allow the farmers to compete with their Australian counterparts.<sup>181</sup> It was at this juncture, with open dissent rising, that the government announced that the subsidy on wool would rise from 10 per cent to 25 per cent.<sup>182</sup> This move gained a little support from some Natal sheep farmers. A resolution was passed by the Dundee Farmers' Association stating:

That this meeting of farmers of the electorate [*sic*] district of Dundee wishes to express its gratitude to the Government for increasing the subsidy from 10 per cent to 25 per cent and therefore declares itself fully in favour of the Government's decision to remain on the Gold Standard.

That this meeting of farmers respectfully requests the Government to assist those farmers who are unable to meet their obligations either by stopping impending prosecutions or by coming to their assistance some other way.<sup>183</sup>

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179. *Ibid.*

180. CAD, A32, (Hertzog Papers), F155, W P Purdon to Hertzog, 19 January 1932.

181. CAD, A32, (Hertzog Papers) F155, Marwick to Hertzog, 11 December 1931.

182. *The Farmer*, 22 January 1932, p. 14.

183. CAD, A32, (Hertzog Papers), F155, F R McKenzie (Secretary, Dundee Farmers' Association) to Hertzog, 23 February 1932.

Some farmers were more grateful:

Hierdie vergadering ondersteun die Regering heelhartig en laat die handhawing van die Goudstandaard in sy hande en spreek sy waardering uit tenoor die Regering vir die verdere tegemoetkoming deur die verhoging van die subsidie aan die Boere.<sup>184</sup>

In reality, the subsidy made little difference to Natal sheep farmers, as the following case shows: A farmer in the Midlands received £200 for his wool and £50 as an export subsidy; but the South African pound had appreciated by 31½ per cent, so the farmer felt he should have received £292. He claimed to have lost £42 on his clip.<sup>185</sup> Another wool farmer who signed himself "Agricola" was even more vehement:

I recently read in one of their agricultural papers how things with sheep farmers were booming in Australia, where they are getting just double the price that the South African farmer gets for his wool. How many farmers realise what this Gold Standard folly is costing them? Taking wool as an example, South Africa produces 300 000 000 lbs. and if we take 3¼d. per lb. as the average price, it would realise £4 375 000. Add 25% subsidy £1 095 000; total £5 470 000. Whereas if we were linked with Sterling the farmer would get at least 6d. (average) per lb., totalling £ 7 500 000. Consequently, on wool alone, the farmer has been diddled of £2 000 000, which has been lost to the country; and besides, the whole community has been specially taxed to find the subsidy...so that the total financial loss is a colossal figure for South Africa...Verily, those responsible have much to answer for to the people of this ruined country.<sup>186</sup>

The announcement of the abandonment of the gold standard did nothing to abate the fury of farmers. In an editorial, *The Farmer* had this to say:

And what good has it all done? To what purpose has been the ordeal of the last year? Is there anything to show for the desperate adherence to the Gold Standard? Nothing but a

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184. CAD, A32 (Hertzog Papers), F 155, C D Ferreira (Sekretaris van die NP Mannetak, Newcastle) to Hertzog, 23 November 1932.

185. Letter from "Let Down", Nottingham Road, *The Farmer*, 12 August 1932, p. 24.

186. *The Farmer*, 9 December 1932, p. 24.

picture of the wreckage of once prosperous farms, of ruined families, a record of forced sales, of thousands thrown off the land they love so well, to swell the ranks of the unemployed, or earn a pittance with a pick-and-shovel gang.<sup>187</sup>

No estimates of the cost to Natal wool farmers of the government's gold standard policy can be found, but judging from the foregoing, the loss to farmers must have been considerable. It is clear that the experience of the depression left a lasting impression on sheep farmers in Natal, for the post-depression period saw a great diminution in the numbers of woolled sheep in the province and many sheep farmers began to produce mutton rather than wool.<sup>188</sup>

### Cattle and Dairy Farming

Cattle have always been part of the lives of the inhabitants of Natal, be they the Zulu or the Voortrekkers and British settlers. In the nineteenth century, cattle were fairly well distributed across the whole region, with the exception of some of the furthestmost regions of Zululand, where the tsetse fly carried nagana. As intensive farming spread, so cattle farming was gradually forced inland, away from the coastal belt. The topography of the entire region, with its broken territory and hilly terrain, made much of the land area of the entire region only suitable for livestock, as the land could not successfully be put to the plough. Well into the twentieth century, 67 per cent of all land in Natal was still being described as "veld," and was largely being utilised as grazing.<sup>189</sup>

White-owned cattle were kept mainly either for beef or for dairying purposes, with the sale of hides and skins being a sideline. During the years prior to the depression, a marked trend towards dairying and away from beef and trek-oxen production was noted, a tendency which continued during the depression.<sup>190</sup> Dairying was at first concentrated around the major urban centres, as farmers had to deliver their product to the distributors as speedily as possible, but the growth of

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187. *The Farmer*, 6 January 1933, p. 12.

188. Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, p. 100.

189. J M Erskine, *Agriculture in Natal/KwaZulu: Development Potential*, Institute of Natural Resources, Research Monograph No. 1, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1982, pp. 4 - 5.

190. J Fisher, "Looking into Natal's Future", *Farming in South Africa*, Vol 6, May 1931, p. 61.

communications, specifically railways, made it possible for this area to be expanded considerably. Intensive dairying was concentrated in pockets along the railway line, including areas around Pinetown, Camperdown, Pietermaritzburg, Lions River, Estcourt, Bergville, Richmond and Ixopo.<sup>191</sup> Most farmers in these districts produced fresh milk. Farmers in outlying districts tended to produce milk for industrial purposes; the manufacture of cheese, butter and condensed milk was and still is, concentrated in these areas, of which Dundee, Newcastle, Klip River and the southern regions of the province were the most important.<sup>192</sup>

The number of cattle in Natal (including the reserves) in 1930 was 2 485 000, or 24 per cent of the total Union cattle population of 10 574 000.<sup>193</sup> While it is obvious that not all the animals in Natal were milk-producers, the 20 million gallons of milk that were produced constituted 22 per cent of all the milk produced in the Union in 1929/1930.<sup>194</sup> The Midlands produced 48,7 per cent, the northern districts 27,6 per cent and the coastal region only 5,4 per cent of all dairy products in that season.<sup>195</sup> As the urban areas grew, the increased demand for whole-milk (fresh milk) increased and, encouraged by relatively high prices, farmers responded by greatly increasing production. In 1904, only 3,8 million gallons had been produced; by 1925 7,8 million gallons were being produced. It is obvious then that dairy farming in Natal, as elsewhere in the Union, was in the midst of a great boom in the early decades of this century.<sup>196</sup> As this boom continued, so surpluses began to build up, especially of cheese and butter, and the manufacturers of cheese and butter began to look increasingly to the export market to reduce the surplus, or the local price would have been forced downwards. This impetus towards export was hastened by the onset of the depression, which brought about a decline in domestic milk consumption throughout the Union.<sup>197</sup>

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191. McWhirter, "Agriculture", p. 55.

192. *Ibid.*

193. *Handbook*, Table 9, p. 18.

194. C W Abbott, "Dairying" in *Agriculture in Natal: Recent Developments*, p. 156.

195. Hurwitz, *Agriculture*, p. 93. Hurwitz does not indicate which region/s made up the shortfall.

196. *Ibid.*

197. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 79.



Table 5.10  
Exports of Butter and Cheese from the Union, 1928-1934

Year	Butter		Cheese	
	Quantity (1 000lbs)	Value £	Quantity (1000lbs)	Value £
1928	393	34 300	298	19 700
1929	2 337	67 000	304	22 300
1930	2 904	179 100	1 954	77 100
1931	4 521	233 000	2 186	81 600
1932	4 328	223 700	2 364	101 900
1933	2 508	123 600	1 238	50 500
1934	2 855	172 800	396	19 900

Source: *Handbook*, Table 112, p. 125.

The increase in the amount of butter and cheese exported continued until 1933, when the drought adversely affected the production of milk and a greater proportion was retained to meet local requirements.

The manufacturers of cheese had attempted, with government assistance, to stabilise prices and to pay producers a bounty on all cheese exported. This scheme was fairly successful and the 45 cheese factories in Natal were able to keep prices paid to producers at reasonable levels until 1931.<sup>198</sup> The government decided that the dairy industry was in need of regulation, and in September 1930 a Dairy Control Board was established as a result of the Dairy Industry Control Act (No. 35 of 1930). The Board imposed a levy on all cheese and butter either made in or imported into the Union. With the proceeds of this levy, export bounties were paid to producers. Restrictions on the importation of dairy products were also imposed, guaranteeing farmers and producers virtually unfettered access to local markets.<sup>199</sup> Natal farmers were still unhappy with this, forecasting lower prices in 1931:

The prices (of dairy products) Overseas were declining and there was no saying what the prices would be after the Summer Months. Probably they would go lower still. The bonus scheme would not assist to the extent of maintaining prices at past levels for, in spite of the drought, production was going up.<sup>200</sup>

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198. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

199. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Had the farmers been able to forecast the adverse effects of the exchange rate on their returns, once Britain had departed from the gold standard, their cries would have been more strident — and indeed they were, just short of a year later.<sup>201</sup>

Farmers also looked enviously at the prices for milk realised in the urban areas, when compared to the producer's prices. In 1931, milk was selling in Durban for 4d per pint, but the farmers were only getting 6d to 10d per gallon (eight pints).<sup>202</sup> Little could be done to remedy this, beyond withholding supplies of milk from industry, which was attempted in 1931, without markedly improving matters. The great drought which began to make itself felt in late 1932 and 1933 had the effect of drastically cutting milk production in most areas of the Union. Natal was not as severely affected, except in the northern districts and Zululand. Drought caused farmers to reduce the size of their herds at a time when domestic meat prices were falling.<sup>203</sup>

Viewed in totality, the effects of the depression and drought on dairy farmers would have been far worse had the Dairy Board not acted to force the export of surplus. Despite the cost to the producers, the reduction of the local milk surplus ensured that prices remained at levels that were not ruinous. Even though prices for cheese and butter on the international market had shown a marked decline for most of the depression years, as Table 5.11 shows, the benefits of export were to be seen in the reduction of the domestic surplus.

**Table 5.11**  
**Average Export Prices for Butter and Cheese, 1928-1934.**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Cheese per lb.</b>	<b>Butter per lb.</b>
1928	1s 5d	1s 8d
1929	1s	1s 5d
1930	9d	1s 2.5d
1931	8.d	1s
1932	10d	1s
1933	9.6d	11.8d
1934	11.4d	11.2d

**Source:** Adapted from Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 83.

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200. NAU, Minutes of the Executive Committee, 11 December 1930.

As the Report of the Secretary for Agriculture pointed out in 1933:

The dairy industry has also passed through a difficult time, and oversea prices were, at one time, at such a low level that had it not been for the bonus and Government subsidy the net price per lb. to the exporter would only have been 6d. and 2½d. for butter and cheese respectively. Incidentally these oversea prices did not cover production costs in spite of the bonus and subsidy.<sup>204</sup>

The production of beef was also fraught with uncertainties as prices in the major domestic centres fell with declining demand. Apart from contracts to supply the Italian and Belgian armies with frozen beef, the Union was not a significant exporter of beef. Pilot schemes were instituted, with considerable government assistance (the subsidy on exported meat was 35 per cent), to export South African frozen or chilled beef to London on an experimental basis. The prices realised, however, even with the subsidy, were not found to be adequate. South African beef producers, including those in Natal, were therefore largely dependent on the local market to dispose of their meat. Prices declined markedly during the depression years. On average, the farmer was receiving £3 per beast less in July 1932, than he had been in 1929.<sup>205</sup> A surplus of beef on the market in Durban, caused by a large oversupply of cattle, depressed prices to levels lower than those which prevailed in the other major centres of the Union.<sup>206</sup> The price of beef in Durban was 3s to 4s below that obtainable in Johannesburg,<sup>207</sup> adding to the woes of the Natal farmer.

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201. NAU, Minutes of the Executive Committee, 3 December 1931.

202. *The Farmer*, 2 October 1931, p. 15.

203. Report of the Secretary for Agriculture, reprinted in *Farming in South Africa*, Vol. 8, December 1933, p. 447.

204. Report of the Secretary for Agriculture, reprinted in *Farming in South Africa*, Vol. 8, December 1933, p. 450.

205. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 74.

206. In a letter to the Prime Minister, the Underberg Farmers' Association blamed the "...disastrously low prices being received for fat stock..." on the lack of credit caused by the government's adherence to the gold standard", and reaffirmed their resolution of 10 October 1931, calling on the government to go off gold. CAD, A32, (Hertzog Papers), F155, Underberg Farmers' Association to Hertzog, 7 July 1932.

207. Report of the Secretary for Agriculture reprinted in *Farming in South Africa*, Vol. 8, December 1933, pp. 449 - 450.

Nor could Natal cattle farmers realise much from the sale of hides and skins from their slaughtered stock. This once-profitable sideline depended almost entirely on the export market and, as demand for leather dropped, so the prices began to fall. The fall had begun even before the depression itself, as a result of increased competition from leather substitutes and the failure of a number of hide-importing houses. So precipitous was the decline that by the onset of the depression in 1929, prices were lower than they had been in 1921, the nadir of the post-war depression in Europe. This situation was to continue worsening until the Union left the gold standard at the end of 1932,<sup>208</sup> when a slight recovery in prices made it possible to dispose of the surplus that had built up in the Union.<sup>209</sup> Yet another source of income for hard-pressed farmers had dried up.

Farmers of all types had very few avenues which held any hope of regaining profitability during the depression years. Natal's agriculture, apart from the coastal districts where sugar predominated, was far more diversified than in any other region of the country. Even this did not, however, completely shield farmers from the depression, for commercial farming operations in Natal were largely geared to the export market and thus were exposed to the vicissitudes of oversupply and falling prices. Faced with declining profitability, farmers tried to increase production, which was largely self-defeating. Yet there was one area in which savings could be made, and profitability increased, and that was the area of labour.

Agriculture in Natal in the early decades of this century was not highly mechanised; on the contrary, it was labour intensive. Some 132 546 persons worked on 10 414 farms in Natal in 1930. The vast majority, some 106 352 persons, were Africans.<sup>210</sup> Conditions of employment varied from district to district and from industry to industry. The sugar and wattle industries generally made use of recruited labour to

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208. Ravenscroft gives June 1932 as the month in which the lowest price, namely 2.75d per lb., was realised on the Port Elizabeth market, which was the largest market serving this trade. Prices had fallen 82,9 per cent since April 1928. Ravenscroft, "Depression", p. 9.

209. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 77. Minnaar quoted the average price received per lb. for hides and skins as 12,3d in 1928, falling to only 3d in 1932, before recovering to 5,2d in 1933.

210. *Handbook*, pp. 3, 11. These figures include owners.

supplement the local supply, while in the northern districts, where maize, dairying and wool predominated, extensive use was made of labour tenants. In fact, 70 per cent of all African agricultural labourers in the province were labour tenants.<sup>211</sup> Whatever the industry or district, labour came under great pressure from employers during the depression as farmers struggled to make ends meet. Many workers were simply ejected from white farms.<sup>212</sup>

The only complaint is that Natives are being turned off farms and that they have nowhere to go. This is due to a certain extent to the precarious position of the European farmers, who find themselves unable to employ or give grazing to as many Natives as formerly...<sup>213</sup>

This left many Africans in a desperate state:

Many Natives, with their families, have recently been turned off European owned farms, they are unable to make fresh contracts, in some cases [they] are too old or otherwise unsuitable for mine labour, there is no room for them in the Maguswana Location and the Department of Lands will not allow them to live on Crown Lands. Such cases are not uncommon in this district...<sup>214</sup>

Wages were reduced, conditions of employment revised to benefit employers, and even the legal machinery of the state was employed to gain greater control over labour in a time of economic stress. It is not mere coincidence that the Native Service Contract Act (No. 24 of 1932) should have found its way onto the statute books during the depression years.<sup>215</sup> The effect of this act was to give farmers

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211. J Streak, "Perceptions and Conflict: White Farmers, Labour Shortages, Tenancy and Labour Control in Northern and Mid-Natal during the late 1930s", B A(Hons.) long essay, University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), 1990, p. 11.

212. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom*, pp. 55 - 59.

213. NAD, CNC, Vol. 95A, File 68/1 (Part III), Native Commissioner, Newcastle to Chief Native Commissioner, Pietermaritzburg, 21 September 1933.

214. NAD, CNC, Vol. 95A, File 68/1 (Part III), Native Commissioner, Underberg to Chief Native Commissioner, Pietermaritzburg, 21 September 1933.

215. W H Hutt, "The Economic Position of the Bantu in South Africa" in I Schapera (ed.), *Western Civilization and the Natives of South Africa*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1967, p. 198. Hutt claims that government fears of a rising "black proletariat" consequent upon the demise of the labour tenancy system also prompted government action.

greater control over their labour and to render tenants more exploitable.<sup>216</sup>

As discussed in chapter two, one of the causes of the Great Depression was a world-wide overproduction in primary products leading to a fall in agricultural prices on world markets. Natal's white commercial farmers were severely affected by this crisis, particularly those who were attempting to export sugar and wool. The decision of the South African government to remain on the gold standard further exacerbated the situation and subsidisation did little to alleviate it.

Internally, the farmers were also faced with serious difficulties. Natural disasters, accepted as a hazard in agriculture, followed each other during these years in a sequence which left unprecedented devastation in its wake. Given that these disasters occurred during a time of falling prices, it may be considered something of a minor triumph for farmers that so few of them were forced into bankruptcy courts.<sup>217</sup>

Farmers had few options to consider in trying to shield themselves from the effects of the depression: more efficient farming and better utilisation of resources simply added to the overproduction and further depressed prices. Diversification was attempted to some extent, notably in the planting of wattle in the midlands, but as prices were falling across the board this brought little relief. The situation did lead to a greater acceptance among Natal farmers of government control through marketing boards.

As will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter, the plight of the white farmers had severe repercussions on the the black labourers and tenants on their farms. In trying to boost production, self-defeating as it may have been, white farmers reduced the land available to black tenants and in many cases turned them

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216. There is increasing interest in agricultural labour during this period. Some recent works include Lacey, *Boroko*; V Harris, "Land, Labour and Ideology : Government Land Policy and the Relations between Africans and Whites on the land in Northern Natal, 1910-1936," M.A. thesis, University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), 1984 and J Streak, "Perceptions and Conflict" previously cited.

217. *Annual Reports of the Durban Chamber of Commerce* for relevant years. These *Reports* give the number of farmers declaring bankruptcy as 151 for the years 1929/1933.

off their farms. Labourers whom they could no longer afford to pay even the meagre average wage were also dismissed. The displaced people were forced to migrate to the already overcrowded reserves or to enter the urban areas. The circumstances of those who chose the latter option will be examined in chapters seven and eight.

The hardships suffered by farmers left an indelible impression on the collective consciousness and obviously had political repercussions. Their stance on the gold standard question united Natal farmers as nothing ever had before, and forced organised agriculture to become politicised, a state of affairs which had previously been regarded as unacceptable. The political alignment of white farmers with established and newly formed parties during the depression years will be discussed in greater detail in chapter nine.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE RESERVE ECONOMY UNDER STRESS

Assessment of the situation of Africans during the depression necessitates a detailed study of the rural areas set aside for their exclusive occupation — the so-called native reserves or locations.<sup>1</sup> However, since space does not permit the separate investigation of every area, generalisations, with all their attendant dangers for the historian, are inevitable.<sup>2</sup> Equally frustrating is the lack of adequate and detailed statistical information. Nevertheless, despite these disclaimers, it is possible to show how the lives of the inhabitants of the reserves were influenced by the economic changes that took place as a result of the depression and drought. It will be shown that even those Africans living in remote areas of the reserves could not remain unaffected by the twin calamities of the early 1930s.

Briefly sketched, the history of the reserves, goes back as far as 1841, when the Volksraad of the Republic of Natalia were making plans for the setting up of a separate area to house all those Africans, resident in Natal, who were not working on white farms. These plans did not come to fruition and it became the task of successive British governors and their able administrators, most notably Theophilus Shepstone, to arrive at suitable policies and to allocate land for this purpose.<sup>3</sup> The result of these early policies was the so-called Shepstone System, under which Africans were allocated land under the control of their own chiefs, thus perpetuating the tribal system. Apparently, it had been Shepstone's intention to grant each "tribe" settled in a reserve full title to their land, but this was never ratified. Instead,

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1. In the twentieth century, the term "location" came to refer more to those areas occupied by Africans in urban or peri-urban areas. Earlier, however, the terms were often used completely interchangeably and this practice has been continued. See MacMillan's explanation in *Complex South Africa*, p. 135 and Davenport, "Urban Segregation", p. 1.
  2. I have not drawn any special distinctions between reserves in the different areas of the province, nor between mission reserves and "ordinary" reserves. This is not because conditions in all the reserves were identical, for they were obviously not. While there is a considerable body of literature on the mission reserves covering the nineteenth century, very little of substance could be found for the twentieth century, despite exhaustive research.
  3. E H Brookes and N Hurwitz, *The Native Reserves of Natal*, being Vol. 7 of *The Natal Regional Survey*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1957, pp. 1 - 11.



control was vested in the Natal Native Trust, before passing to the Governor-in-Executive-Council until Union in 1910, after which it was given into the hands of the Governor-General-in-Executive-Council. The latter also took control of the Zululand Trust.<sup>4</sup> The Native Land Act of 1913 demarcated areas which were set aside exclusively for occupation by Africans. In Natal, this law did not meaningfully alter the borders of the existing reserves, which remained as they were until 1936.

Thus in 1926, according to Lacey, there were approximately 3 633 210 morgen set aside as "native reserves" or "locations"; a further 146 168 morgen of African-occupied "mission lands and reserves"; and 807 133 morgen of Crown Land occupied by Africans in Natal, making a total of 4 586 503 morgen. On this land, lived some 1 149 980 Africans.<sup>5</sup> These figures, like all figures relating to the extent and population density of reserves in Natal, must be treated cautiously, as Smith pointed out.<sup>6</sup> Smith put the total number of Africans residing in Natal reserves at 910 000, with a further 670 000 residing on Crown and Mission reserves, but his figures are based on the 1936 census and cannot be regarded as accurate for the period 1929 to 1933. MacMillan gives the total extent of the scheduled areas (reserves) as 3 772 square miles and the population as "...a round million of Natives".<sup>7</sup> Whatever the vagaries of the statisticians, it is important to note that the population density of the reserves in Natal, based on the 1921 census figures, was such that these areas were amongst the most densely populated of all areas in the Union. It stands to reason that population density figures varied considerably within this; Zululand was relatively thinly populated at 24,66 persons per square mile, while districts close to Durban were far more crowded. Inanda, for example, had a population density of 150,65 persons per square mile.<sup>8</sup>

An examination of the topography and other natural features reveals that despite

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4. *Ibid.*, pp. 11 - 12.

5. Lacey, *Boroko*, p. 388.

6. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 126. Smith pointed out that even as late as 1938, discrepancies between the figures acquired from the Native Affairs Department, the 1936 Census, and Survey Maps were considerable.

7. MacMillan, *Complex South Africa*, p. 135.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

the "generous" allocation of land to Africans in Natal,<sup>9</sup> much of this land was not suitable for cultivation, being very broken and hilly in nature — typical "monkey country".<sup>10</sup> In an article in *Ilanga lase Natal*, J Mapumulo quoted an unnamed "Scottish writer" who wrote of the Native locations of Natal:

The Native Locations are generally the most barren, wild and broken parts of the country. Only small portions here and there are adapted for cultivation, and much of the land is not fitted even for pasturage but only the habitation of the eagle and the baboon.<sup>11</sup>

Moolman classified the reserves of Natal in the following way:

Mountains:	35 per cent
Very Mountainous:	40 per cent
Hilly:	34 per cent
Flat:	11 per cent. <sup>12</sup>

The Zululand coastal region, preferable in terms of its warm climate and adequate rainfall, was infested with malaria and nagana, which took their toll of both man and beast. Scarcity of water at crucial times of the year also contributed to the very low population density in this region. The interior of Zululand is very hilly, and the soils are shallow and unproductive, making it suitable only for cattle rearing. Its many river valleys, however, contained dense settlement rising to 100 persons per square mile, and intensive farming was practised. This area had seen great population growth in the 1920s; Cope claimed that the population had increased by a significant 43 per cent between 1916 and 1936.<sup>13</sup> The Magistrate and Native Commissioner for Melmoth, Mr E N Braatvedt,<sup>14</sup> said of the congested areas of Tanbene near Redhill and Nqwehqwe:

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9. Lacey, *Boroko*, p. 29. There were many whites, especially farmers, who considered that too much land had been allocated to Africans.
  10. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 141; MacMillan, *Complex South Africa*, p. 135.
  11. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 31 October 1930.
  12. J H Moolman, "Die Geografie van die Bantoegebiede", *The South African Geographical Journal*, Vol. 37, December 1955, p. 7. (My translation.)
  13. Cope, "Zulu Royal family", p. 235.
  14. Sometimes also spelt "Braadvedt".

We have a large area there. The Native Reserve is in the vicinity of 190 000 acres, on paper, but out of that, an area of 50 000 acres is uninhabitable, on account of nagana, fever and lack of water.<sup>15</sup>

In the Thukela Valley, the great variety of soils and terrain made it possible for some areas to support a very dense population of over 200 persons per square mile.

The situation in the reserves of Natal proper was even more serious. Taking the coastal region first, the humid sub-tropical climate and high rainfall permitted intensive farming, both within and outside the reserves. The land was densely occupied, especially within a 30-mile radius of Durban. Population densities ranged from 120 persons per square mile in these coastal reserves to 298 persons per square mile on mission reserves. The Natal Midlands were equally densely populated, although the climate and soil types were little better than the coastal regions. The foothills of the Drakensberg were also overcrowded by man and beast, the grazing permitting large cattle populations in most areas. Population densities varied, but rose as high as over 200 persons per square mile in some districts.<sup>16</sup>

Much of the evidence presented to the Native Economic Commission (NEC) supported the popular perception that the reserves of Natal were overpopulated, while those of Zululand were less crowded. A few examples of such evidence will suffice to illustrate this point:

Die lokasies, soos U weet, is gepak met kaffers...En geloo [*sic*] my, ons moet elke dag hope, applikasies afslaan van naturelle wat by ons wil kom [woon].<sup>17</sup>

'n Ander ding wat ek wil sê is dit: om te denk dat die kaffer wegtrek van die boer se grond omdat hy so ellendig behandel word — daar bestaan nie so 'n ding nie; die lokasies is propvol van die ene end na die ander en daar is nie 'n kaffer wat van die baas se grond sal weggaan om in die lokasies te gaan bly.<sup>18</sup>

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15. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Eilert Nils Braatvedt, Melmoth, 29 September 1930, p. 1872. Braatvedt also said that the population of the area had grown substantially due to the eviction of Africans from white farms as the area under cultivation increased.

16. Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, pp. 45 - 53.

17. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of J J Kemp and D J Uys (Helpmekaar District), Dundee, 17 September 1930, p. 1325.

In his evidence, Archdeacon Lee stated that there was a great deal of migration from the reserves of Natal into Zululand as "...Zululand is not congested. Its Native areas are adequate." He claimed that if all the land were properly surveyed and allocated equitably there would be "...plenty of land for the Natives, even excess". But even he was doubtful if the inhabitants could survive: "...they would never be able to keep themselves and there would always be a surplus to go out to work".<sup>19</sup> Some Africans, however, had different perceptions:

Question: But from our evidence Zululand is not overcrowded. Why do they go there?

Answer: I know of cases where natives have gone to reserves and they have had to come back. They cannot get any place there.

Question: Why cannot they?

Answer: They say that the places are overcrowded. I could mention instances to you.<sup>20</sup>

The Revd Oscroft also directed the Commission's attention to the fact that some areas of Zululand were overcrowded:

It is my opinion that the native reserves are showing signs of congestion, for instance parts of Nkandhla and Nqutu districts. These parts are seriously congested at present and have been for several years.<sup>21</sup>

In this assertion he was supported by Gilbert Robinson of the Zululand Farmers' Association who gave evidence that overstocking and overtilling had denuded the land in the Ntongweni Valley.

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18. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of D J Uys, Helpmekaar District, Dundee, 17 September 1930, p. 1330.

19. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Archdeacon A W Lee, Vryheid, 18 September 1930, pp. 1404 - 1434.

20. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of William Washington Ndhlovu, Vryheid, 20 September 1930, p. 1559.

21. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of the Revd Oscroft, Nongoma, 22 September 1930, p. 1638. This evidence was corroborated by that of the Revd W Hallows. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of the Revd W Hallows, Eshowe, 30 September 1930, p. 1966.

I really want to bring this to the notice of the Commission, to show how a number of these reserves in Zululand are overstocked and overtilled.<sup>22</sup>

Mr Rodseth, the Superintendent of Reserves, who was present at the time, agreed, explaining that because the region right up to the Umfolozi was a nagana-infested area,<sup>23</sup> all the cattle in that reserve were "congregated" in the southern portion.<sup>24</sup> However, the general perception of the white farmers of Zululand was different. Judging from the evidence of C W Dent, they appear to have been convinced that the relative prosperity of the reserves of Zululand lay at the root of their labour problems:

Natives are better off in the Reserves of Zululand than elsewhere in the Union and better off than they were 15 years ago. Wages have risen 100 per cent in that period...at the same time there appears to be a large number of adult natives in the Reserves who are not seeking work.<sup>25</sup>

The apparent conflict of evidence between Robinson and Dent may be partially explained by the desire on the part of the former to show that Africans were poor farmers who degraded the land, thus justifying greater white ownership of land.

The significance of population density figures lies in the fact that the land allocated was intended, to a greater or lesser extent, to support the families that resided on it. This was the basis on which the entire migrant labour system rested. The reserves were to act as reservoirs of labour for both farmers and urban employers. Yet it was intended that while the labour of some family members was required outside, the rest of the family would be self-supporting on the land allocated in the reserve.<sup>26</sup>

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22. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Gilbert Robinson, Empangeni, 26 September 1930 p. 1842.
  23. For more information on nagana in Zululand, see A de V Minnaar, "Nagana, Big-game Drives and the Zululand Game Reserves", *Contree*, Vol. 25, 1989 and S Brookes, "Playing the Game: The Struggle for Wildlife Protection in Zululand, 1910-1930", MA thesis, Queen's University, Kingston, Canada, 1990.
  24. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Mr Rodseth, Empangeni, 26 September 1930, p. 1844.
  25. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of C W Dent *et al.*, representing the Zululand Farmers' Association, Empangeni, 26 September 1930, pp. 1817 - 1818.
  26. For a fuller discussion of this question see M Wilson and L Thompson (eds.), *The Oxford History of South Africa*, Vol. 2, Oxford, 1971, pp. 65ff.

By the time of the depression, this system was clearly becoming less and less tenable in most of the reserve areas.

Another aspect which deserves consideration is the fact that the Natal reserves had been allocated with little spare capacity to allow for population growth; there was scant room for sons to set up their own homesteads upon marriage. Nor was any provision made for the African system of primogeniture, whereby the eldest son inherited all the land held by his father on the latter's demise. Other sons were thus left landless. The lack of land meant a lack of cattle for *lobola* and was thus a strong incentive for the young men to go in search of paid employment beyond the borders of the reserves. For those who needed further encouragement to enter the white cash economy, this was provided in the form of taxation.<sup>27</sup> Even relatively unpopular employers, like the coal-mines of Natal, were flooded with labour when taxes fell due:

I think that this taxation has a wonderfully good effect on the labour supply. When the time comes for tax collecting comes round here, you find that as soon as the time is due for them to pay their taxes you cannot cope with the amount of labour offering for the mines [*sic*]. That is the only time a Native will voluntarily go out to work whether he feels like it or not. That is the only time the mines have plenty of labour. If they were not compelled to pay this tax about 50 per cent of them would never turn out for work.<sup>28</sup>

Collections of tax outside of the reserves provide a fairly good indication of the degree of outside employment, as do masculinity rates, but no figures can be found which directly cover the period under study. The Revd Osocroft of Nongoma, who acted as Census Officer for the district, stated that up to 40 per cent of males of working age were away from home for between three and six months of the year.<sup>29</sup> The full decennial census due in 1931 was restricted (as an economy measure) to the

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27. J M Tinley, *The Native Labour Problem of South Africa*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1942, p. 19.

28. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of I W de Jager, representing the Collieries, Dundee, 17 September 1930, p. 1351.

29. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of the Revd Osocroft, Nongoma, 22 September 1930, p. 1659. Osocroft does not make explicit whether this was the general rule (most likely), or only applied to the census year; nor did he specify to which census year he was referring.

gathering of information concerning the white population alone. However, as a guide, Smith claimed that at the time of the census in 1936, 12,5 per cent of all Africans from the reserves of Natal and Zululand were working away from home; the 12,5 per cent included almost a quarter of the total male population of working age.<sup>30</sup> Professor Frankel, in his evidence to the NEC, suggested that by the 1930s Africans were streaming into the white cash economy and that taxation was by that stage superfluous, as sheer starvation was forcing many Africans into wage labour. Frankel put it thus:

There can be no doubt that the historical cause of the present general Native tax of £1 (and probably also of pass fees) is to be found in the desire to force Natives to work. In my opinion...the Natives are today being driven by a far stronger force than taxation, to find work on almost any terms that will give them and their dependants a livelihood. This force is the threat of starvation in the overcrowded reserves.<sup>31</sup>

Migrant labour played a significant role in undermining agricultural advancement in the reserves, for the absence of many of the most able men during crucial periods of the year helped to perpetuate the old tribal custom in which women were the main agricultural workers.<sup>32</sup> Despite the fact that men were generally less active in agriculture than women, they did have important and clearly defined roles, including ploughing. Smith even suggested that when the migrants returned to their homes, they showed little enthusiasm for, knowledge of, or skill in agricultural pursuits.<sup>33</sup> The NEC found that prejudice, emanating from tribal elders and neighbours, also prevented Africans who had acquired more sophisticated farming skills, during their periods of outside employment on white farms, from utilising such skills:

If a man became too rich this was ascribed to witchcraft, against which 'smelling out' proved to be an effective remedy...This probably largely explains the circumstance, noticed by us throughout the Reserves that Natives who have

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30. Smith, "Labour Resources", pp. 158 -160.

31. Written submission of Professor S Frankel to NEC, quoted in Lacey, *Boroko*, p. 166.

32. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Albertus Steenkamp, Dundee, 17 September 1930, p. 1317. "But most of the owners are away and women and children do the work, which makes it very hopeless."

33. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 166.

learnt up-to-date methods on the European farms, seldom practise them in their own area.<sup>34</sup>

Often their efforts did more harm than good:

...the Native areas are almost all in previously unwanted parts of the country...mainly in mountainous districts. Through the resultant denudation and erosion, over-stocking is ravaging large tracts of land, and it is a hard physical fact that, at an accelerating pace, the locations are becoming less and less able to support their populations. It is particularly unfortunate that the Natives, with their primitive agricultural methods, plus the steel plough, should have been relegated to the hilly country where, with high gradient ploughing, they can do most damage.<sup>35</sup>

The reserves were meant only to sustain a subsistence economy. It was not intended that Africans residing in the reserves should become competitors of the white farmers; Africans were neither expected nor encouraged to grow marketable cash crops. Small amounts of sugar-cane, tobacco, cotton and vegetables were cultivated for sale more as an exception than the rule; most areas were planted to food crops for domestic consumption.

## Maize

By far the most important food crop was maize, which was the staple food of Africans throughout the reserves. Millet, the original indigenous crop, had declined in importance, which was unfortunate because it grew better in the more arid parts. Where conditions permitted, beans and root crops were also grown.<sup>36</sup> The amount of land under crops varied with the population density and the topography, ranging from intensive cultivation in the south, to only 3 to 15 per cent north of the Thukela.

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34. Union of South Africa, *Report of the Native Economic Commission*, UG 22/1932 (hereafter Report of NEC), p. 5, para. 26; See also CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Captain Frank Ferguson (representing the Izingolweni Farmers' Association), Harding, 8 October 1930, p. 2161.

35. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 141.

36. Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, pp. 101 - 102. Maize and millet together constituted approximately 86 per cent of all crops grown.



Due to the absence of crop-rotation and the lack of adequate fertilization, maize yields in the reserves were considerably below those on white farms in Natal.<sup>37</sup> Even coastal regions which had high rainfall and reasonably good soils could not produce enough to sustain life and maize had to be imported from other districts.<sup>38</sup> Rheinallt Jones puts the average production in the Natal reserves at two 200lb. bags per acre.<sup>39</sup> A figure of 2,1 bags per acre in a "normal season" was also given by the Director of Native Agriculture, R W Thornton,<sup>40</sup> in his evidence to the NEC.<sup>41</sup> However, Table 6.1 illustrates that although maize production during the late 1920s and early 1930s fluctuated tremendously, there was a general upward trend in production.

**Table 6.1**  
**Maize Production in African Reserves in Natal, 1926-1935.**  
**(in 200lb. bags)**

Year	Quantity
1926	311 000
1927	379 000
1928	409 000
1929	420 000
1930	882 000
1931	440 000*
1932	449 000*
1933	570 000*
1934	998 000
1935	698 000

\*Estimates by NAD

**Source:** *Handbook*, Table 36, p. 53.<sup>42</sup>

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- 37. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 142.
  - 38. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of the Revd Martin Leisegang at Stanger on 2 October 1930, p. 2032.
  - 39. J D Rheinallt Jones, "The Urban Native" in I Schapera (ed.), *Western Civilization and the Natives of South Africa*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, (reprint) 1967, p. 168.
  - 40. Thornton was appointed to this position in 1929. See *South African Outlook*, 1 July 1929. His appointment was later welcomed by *Ilanga lase Natal* as a "...fascinating Christmas box for Natives". *Ilanga lase Natal*, 27 December 1929. It is difficult to ascertain whether the appointment resulted in any significant improvement in agricultural methods among Africans in the Union, but it may be seen as part of a growing realisation in official circles that agricultural conditions in the reserves would have to be improved if the rapid urbanisation of the African population was to be halted.

The drought which struck Natal and Zululand in 1931/32 had a far more serious effect than that of 1933, as far as maize production in the reserves was concerned. Thornton said production in the Zululand region for the season 1930/31 was "below 50 per cent".<sup>43</sup> Yet the overall trend was upwards. Despite this increase in production, Natal reserves remained net maize-importing areas. Smith argued that:

Nevertheless, the salient feature of the Natal agricultural economy as a whole, and of the reserve economy, in particular, is the shortfall in the staple grain crops. The reserves are all maize importing areas. For the purchase of maize, money is required. To secure money, wage employment is necessary.<sup>44</sup>

And indeed, it was. This becomes clear from the following: a family of five would need to produce nearly fourteen bags of maize just to sustain life for a year. To do this seven acres would have to be cultivated. This does not take into account the amount of maize which would have to be sold to raise enough money to pay taxes, a bag of maize selling for approximately 10s.<sup>45</sup> The production and sale of surplus maize to make a living (including provision for tax) was clearly not an option for most reserve Africans.<sup>46</sup> In Zululand, the average cultivated area was only two and a half to three acres per family of five, as opposed to the Transkei average of eight acres.<sup>47</sup> However, the sale of maize, initially grown to sustain life, in order to obtain money was widespread in many parts of the reserves. This self-defeating practice was exacerbated by the depression.

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41. CAD, NEC, K26 F15, Evidence of R W Thornton at Pretoria on 3 June 1931, p. 8395.

42. Smith was very disparaging of official statistics during this period, alleging that those for crop yields might err by between 50 and 60 per cent, as no proper census was taken and the figures are at best estimates. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 168. Merle Lipton in her contribution entitled "South Africa, Two Agricultures?" in F Wilson, A Kooy and D Hendrie (eds) *Farm Labour in South Africa*, David Philip, Cape Town, 1977, pp. 72 - 85, argued that all agricultural statistics pertaining to the reserves should be treated with due caution, as they appear far too conservative.

43. CAD, NEC, K26, F15, Evidence of R W Thornton at Pretoria on 3 June 1931, p. 8394.

44. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 171.

45. This price varied considerably, as will be shown.

46. Rheinallt Jones, "The Urban Native", p. 168.

47. CAD, NEC, K26, F15, Evidence of R W Thornton at Pretoria on 3 June 1931 p. 8403.

Country storekeepers bought maize from Africans who needed money in the early part of the harvesting season, only to sell it back at a profit to the same clientele at a later date. This opportunism, and other "sharp" practices, were soundly condemned by W J Wentzel, a missionary:

En die tweede beswaar wat hulle het — hulle het nie mark nie; dit mag snaaks klink, maar in Utrecht as 'n naturel 20 sakke mielies het, en hy kom by die handelaar en hy wil die mielies vir die handelaar verkoop, dan kry hy nie kontant geld nie, hy kry net alleen handelsware in ruil vir sy produkte...Dit is die groot skande: die winkelier wil geld maak uit die moeilikheid en uit die nood van die naturel.<sup>48</sup>

The storekeepers acted as storage depots, besides providing Africans with the cash required to purchase other necessities.<sup>49</sup> Often, as illustrated above, no cash changed hands and maize was simply bartered for other goods, only to be bought back later, at a higher price.<sup>50</sup> These iniquitous practices, which all too often resulted in Africans being exploited through unfair exchange, were later outlawed.<sup>51</sup> But this did not stop storekeepers from advancing Africans credit, often against wages to be earned or against the security of their cattle. The Revd John Dube was emphatic in his condemnation of this:

The unscrupulous country storekeepers are wolves in sheep skins. By many artifices e.g. overdue accounts in some cases their existence highly doubtful, are sucking the blood of Bantu people in back parts of our country. By certain tricks and also in times of scarcity of food, large numbers of cattle are taken away. The law against profiteering was not evidently enacted against this type of storekeepers [*sic*]. He does not hesitate to take advantage of the depression. He takes advantage of the Native's need of food in a bad season to advance him money or sell him goods at exorbitant rates and he becomes so involved that he loses all freedom of bargaining, both as producer and buyer, being bound to deal with the one store only.<sup>52</sup>

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48. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of W J Wentzel at Newcastle on 16 September 1930, pp. 1238 - 1240.

49. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 145.

50. Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, p. 102.

51. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 145.

52. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Statement of Evidence submitted by the Revd John Dube, Durban, 2 April 1931.

Thus indebtedness often forced Africans into wage employment outside the reserves, a phenomenon which increased in frequency under the economic pressure of the depression.<sup>53</sup> In rare cases, the property of Africans was sold by order of the court to pay debts. As Simon Majozi told the NEC:

Question: In the last year, have there been many cases of your Natives who have had their property sold under order of the court, to pay their debts?

Answer: Taking my people as a whole, there have not been many cases of that kind; but now, in view of the depression, I am apprehensive; I suspect that there will be more than even in the past, not only in respect of such matters, but also even in respect of government dues.<sup>54</sup>

Generally, Africans in the Natal reserves made use of the most primitive grain storage methods; galvanised iron tanks (employed by African and white farmers in the absence of silos) were uncommon, as they were expensive and difficult to transport. Other methods of storage, like earthen pits, often resulted in severe losses due to weather and pests, leading to near starvation at times.<sup>55</sup> This was aggravated by the irregular yields, as Table 6.1 illustrated, while the fact that maize was consumed as a staple on a year-round basis meant that efficient planning and rationing had to be carried out, for the maize had to last until the next harvest.<sup>56</sup> If it did not, famine could result.<sup>57</sup> It has been argued by Lipton that the eating of "green mealies" by Africans in the early part of the season when stocks of dried maize were low, might very well account for the discrepancy in statistics between actual production and bagged dried maize.<sup>58</sup> This certainly may help to explain the

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53. Rheinallt Jones, "The Urban Native", pp. 168 - 169.

54. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Simon Gilbert Evans Majozi, Pietermaritzburg, 9 April 1931, p. 6721.

55. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 145.

56. Letter from "Observer" of Matubatuba [sic], *The Farmer*, 8 April 1932, p. 23. He wrote: "The young mealies have come on well after the heavy rains and most of the natives are eating green mealies, but one fears that as they have nothing else they will not have enough to keep them until next year's crops are ready: but even so matters cannot be worse than last year."

57. Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, p. 103.

58. Lipton, "South Africa: Two Agricultures?", p. 73.

apparently gross underestimates of maize production during the depression years. Yet it would appear that in certain areas there was a real shortage.

Shortages of maize became acute in some areas, especially in 1931 and 1932, and maize had to be distributed by the state.<sup>59</sup> These shortages were caused by a drought that affected most of the reserves in 1931. In a letter to *The Farmer*, "Observer" detailed some of the suffering:

Forgetful though the human race is, it will be a very long time before the year 1931 is forgotten, especially by the natives. I have known some people who have said that the famine in Zululand was not as serious as they were led to believe, but obviously these people knew nothing of the conditions that then existed in the kraals. Many a sick native was unable to recover because of the lack of food, and many a woman fainted at work, so weak had they become. I have known some natives leave their kraals for a month at a time in search of food. They were afraid of going home to their starving families without food.<sup>60</sup>

It stands to reason that subsistence farmers of maize were even more vulnerable to the vagaries of weather, pests and other natural disasters than their counterparts who were market-orientated, for their very survival depended on the food they produced on their land. Incorrect farming methods, especially when applied to marginal or even sub-marginal lands, often produced erratic yields and even led to soil erosion. The only way in which people could survive, if they did not diversify their crops, was to purchase maize from the country storekeeper, often on credit. The exact extent of these credit purchases is not known, but they were reputed to be considerable.<sup>61</sup> In one reserve district alone, the debts of Africans amounted to some £2 000.<sup>62</sup> Mabel Palmer, in her evidence to the NEC, termed money-lending by storekeepers in the reserves a "terribly serious position".<sup>63</sup> The Revd Hallows corroborated this evidence when he said that Africans "...very often get seriously into debt over getting their food".<sup>64</sup>

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59. See Chapter Eight, pp. 257 - 264.

60. Letter from "Observer" of Matubatuba [sic] to *The Farmer*, 8 April 1932, p. 23.

61. Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, p. 102.

62. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Magistrate and Native Commissioner of Port Shepstone, Mr R D Lyle at Port Shepstone on 7 October 1930, p. 2106.

The cost of most items sold in the rural areas during the depression years was generally higher than in the urban areas, as the Revd Oscroft pointed out:

The Native is really interested in the essentials of life; flour, sugar, etc., and there is a tremendous difference in the price which he has to pay in the country as compared with that which he has to pay in town. Take the price of mealies in the Nongoma District. I do not think that he could buy a bag of mealies in Nongoma for anything less than 15/- or 16/-; as a matter of fact, it is usually round about a pound, and yet the same bag can be bought in Durban for 9/-. That is merely an illustration, but the same thing holds good for flour and such things. It costs the natives more to live in the country at the present moment if he wants to live a civilised life and if he wants to live on civilised lines than it does in town.<sup>65</sup>

Perhaps, to be charitable to the storekeepers, the prices were higher because goods had often to be transported considerable distances. However, no charitable interpretation can be put upon evidence of gross profiteering by storekeepers who paid exceptionally low prices to African producers — often between 40 and 50 per cent below the ruling market price.<sup>66</sup> And to make matters worse the price of maize was falling, as the following table indicates:

**Table 6.2**  
**Producers' Price of Maize (per 200lb. bag), 1926 - 1935**

Year	Price
1926	10/10
1927	12/6
1928	10/6
1929	12/0
1930	11/3
1931	6/8
1932	7/1
1933	4/11
1934	11/0
1935	7/8

**Source:** Adapted from *Handbook*, Table 153, p. 183.

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63. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of Mabel Palmer at Durban on 7 April 1931, p. 6406.  
64. Quoted by Lucas in his Addendum to the Report of the NEC, p. 184, para. 78.  
65. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of the Revd Oscroft at Nongoma, 22 September 1930,

As the price of maize declined, it made even less sense for Africans to sell maize in order to meet their cash requirements. In addition, it is obvious that the falling producers' prices were not always passed on to the consumers. The chain of supply from wholesaler to retail outlet was often longer, the country storekeepers making use of agents who all added their costs. The lack of competition among country storekeepers also drove prices up; in most cases there was no other store within a reasonable distance.<sup>67</sup> All these costs were borne by the African purchasers.

When, in times of famine, maize was distributed by local magistrates or Native Commissioners, the country storekeepers objected, as their custom was obviously affected. In fact, in 1931, the famine in certain parts of Zululand was greatly exacerbated by the very late arrival of the promised government maize. The storekeepers, on receipt of intelligence that this distribution was to be made, failed to replenish their stocks of maize and there was none available in certain parts of Zululand, even when the government maize failed to materialise. When the government maize did arrive, it was "...just sufficient to keep the natives alive, and in fact, a lot of natives could not get any".<sup>68</sup> Farmers in nearby districts who were worried about the supply of labour also resented this distribution of maize:

...the giving out of mielies for famine relief is encouraging the natives to stay at home instead of going out to work and it is suggested that relief work on roads would be a better means of meeting the needs of the indigent.<sup>69</sup>

In this letter is contained the nub of the argument for the underdevelopment of the reserves: the idea that, as conditions in the reserves declined due to burgeoning

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pp. 1648 -1649.

66. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of W J Wentzel, at Newcastle on 16 September 1930, p. 1239. At Ixopo stores, Africans were paid 6s per bag for maize. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Paulus Coneo at Ixopo on 9 October 1930, p. 2248.

67. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of John Allen Erlandson at Durban, 1 April 1931 p. 6280. Erlandson said that there were few European stores in Zululand which had "a monopoly of the trade" and that these stores "charge the unfortunate Native whatever they like" because there was no competition.

68. Letter from "Observer" of Matubatuba [sic] to *The Farmer*, 8 April 1932, p. 23.

69. *The Farmer*, 8 January 1932, p. 27.

population growth and consequent overpopulation by man and beast, more potential workers would be squeezed onto the labour market, thus preserving the migrant labour system and maintaining the supply of cheap black labour on white farms, on the mines and in industry.<sup>70</sup> Smith stated:

It is probably true that the progressive deterioration of the reserves makes the Natives more dependent on outside employment and therefore increases the flow of labour. But this is essentially a short-run phenomenon. The ruin of the land must inevitably be followed by a weakening of the physical health of the population, and, in due course, by actual numerical decline, so that the labour supply will suffer first in quality and ultimately in quantity. It is therefore a grave fallacy to deduce from the fact that a poor harvest increases the immediate supply of labour, that a policy of neglect of the Native areas will solve the problem of 'Native labour shortage.'<sup>71</sup>

This was the case, for in the more eroded and underdeveloped parts of Zululand, very few Africans actually went to work; their absentee-rate was amongst the lowest in the Union and it was certainly not because they were able to make an adequate living off the land.<sup>72</sup>

### **Millet**

Millet was (and still is) grown in most areas of the reserves, but does best in the more arid parts. It was precisely this ability to withstand dry conditions that had made millet so valuable a cereal crop. This quality was to stand African subsistence farmers in good stead during the dry years that coincided with the depression. The resilience of subsistence farmers, and their adaptability to changing environmental circumstances, are factors often overlooked by researchers. Subsistence farmers could not passively sit by during drought; their very survival depended on the harvesting of some sort of food crop. When, because of drought, maize yields were

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70. Smith, "Labour Resources", pp. 140 - 141. These were the standard arguments that had been used ever since Shepstone began the reserve system.

71. *Ibid.*, pp. 147 - 148.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 181.



lowered, the more enterprising subsistence farmers must have had recourse to the planting of the drought-resistant indigenous millet to sustain themselves. It is otherwise difficult to explain the vast differences in the yields from year to year, given that millet is a hardy and well-adapted cereal. Table 6.3 shows these fluctuations:

**Table 6.3**  
**Production of Millet (Kaffircorn) in the Reserves**  
**of Natal and Zululand, 1926 - 1934**

Year	Quantity (in 200lb bags)
1926	237 000
1927	135 000
1928	101 000
1929	91 000
1930	146 000
1931	153 000
1932	72 000
1933	209 000
1934	182 000

**Source:** *Handbook*, Table 38, p. 55.

As has been suggested, African subsistence farmers were able to respond to drought conditions by planting more drought-resistant millet in place of the more susceptible maize. It cannot be coincidental that in the worst drought years of 1931 and 1933, the production of millet should have risen so significantly. Almost no millet was ever sold, as it formed one of the main ingredients of the beer made by Africans, and it was therefore unaffected by price fluctuations. However, fluctuations in production could be detrimental to the diet of Africans as the beer was very nutritious.<sup>73</sup>

**Sugar**

African cultivation of sugar-cane began in the nineteenth century and was initially largely confined to mission reserves. By the twentieth century it had spread on a small scale to other reserves, bringing in much-needed cash.<sup>74</sup> There was increasing

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73. Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, p. 106.  
74. R F Bates, "Aspects of Sugar Cane Production in Natal and KwaZulu", M.Sc. (Agric. Econ.)

opposition, however, from less progressive chiefs who saw the cane-fields encroaching on grazing lands,<sup>75</sup> and from white farmers who resented the competition at a time of crisis in the industry.<sup>76</sup> The NEC did report that the Commission had encountered "...one Native of exceptional ability," who owned 80 acres of cane "...from which he appeared to be making a good living".<sup>77</sup> This example was more the exception than the rule, however, as the majority of African cane-growers farmed much smaller acreages.

Despite the opposition from white farmers, less scrupulous millers were exploiting land in some of the reserves through African "fronts", and at the same time circumventing the Land Act. Mr Frederick Rodseth, the Superintendent of Reserves and Inspector of Native Labour for Southern Zululand, explained how this was possible:

There is no lease — no legal form of lease, but the way the mills have got in is this, and undoubtedly the mills were quite in earnest when they started; they lent the Africans money; the Natives failed to work their fields properly, and when the time comes to cut their case [cane] the natives say 'I have not the money to pay for labour,' and that sort of thing, and gradually the position has arisen where the miller simply walks in, ploughs the land, plants it, and cultivates it, cuts it, loads it and brings it in, and leaves the native out of it altogether. He employs recruited labour, pays 2/9 or 2/6 a day for the labour, and charges the native anything from 12% to 60%, I believe, for the money which he has advanced — he works the field for the native and pays out any balance there may be.<sup>78</sup>

The production of sugar-cane by Africans was insignificant when seen against the vast production of white farmers, but must have been regarded as an attractive option by the more "progressive" African farmers in the reserves, for the number of

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thesis, University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg), 1979, p. 50ff.

75. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of George Hulett at Stanger, 2 October 1930, p. 2009.

76. Hulett himself was one of these. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of George Hulett at Stanger on 2 October 1930 p. 2008.

77. Report of the NEC, p. 43, para. 299.

78. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Frederick Rodseth, Eshowe, 30 September 1930, p. 1947.

Africans engaged in the growing of cane was increasing steadily throughout the depression years, as table 6.4 shows.

**Table 6.4**  
**Production of Sugar-Cane by Africans, 1926/27 - 1933/34.**

Year	Number	Tons	Average tonnage
1926/27	584	44 660	76
1927/28	675	42 952	64
1928/29	583	41 038	71
1929/30	585	33 014	56
1930/31	711	52 858	74
1931/32	806	52 073	64
1932/33	710	46 411	65
1933/34	878	52 623	60

**Source:** *Memorandum*, p. 52.

Interestingly, although the number of Africans involved in sugar production increased, their total output remained rather static.<sup>79</sup> The source quoted above does not distinguish between Africans who were independent producers and those who were indebted to millers, as outlined previously. It is possible that the millers were under pressure from white farmers to limit their involvement in the reserves, given the surplus of sugar being exported at a loss.<sup>80</sup> This would perhaps help to explain the difficulties that some African producers had in getting their cane milled.<sup>81</sup> Rodseth spelt this out in his evidence to the NEC. After having said that some Africans grew cane along the South Coast, he explained their difficulties:

Some Farmers' Associations have objected to the Natives sending cane to the mills, and some pressure has certainly been brought to bear on the mills not to accept it.

Mr Lucas:(Commissioner) Has the pressure succeeded?

Mr Rodseth: Yes, to some extent; it succeeds to this extent, that the natives are put up until the end of the season, and then of course the mills just accept the cane or not, if it suits them.

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79. See comments in previous Chapter, pp. 132 - 133.

80. See previous chapter, p. 124.

81. A similar situation prevailed among African commercial maize and tobacco farmers in Southern Rhodesia during the depression years. Whites simply boycotted African-produced goods. See O Hulec, "Some Aspects of the 1930s Depression in Rhodesia", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1969, p. 103.

Mr Lucas: Does it affect the value of the cane, having to wait like that?

Mr Rodseth: During the end of the season the sucrose goes down, making it less valuable and furthermore, it becomes rather awkward, because they suddenly call on a number of small native settlers for their cane, and perhaps they only have three or four waggons between them, and they have great difficulty in getting all their cane off at once...<sup>82</sup>

This could also conceivably be seen as a strategy employed by the less scrupulous millers to undermine the financial position of some independent African producers and ultimately force such producers into a subordinate relationship in which their land in the reserves could be exploited at little cost,<sup>83</sup> thus boosting the profitability of the mills during the economic crisis.<sup>84</sup>

The Native Affairs Department of the Union (NAD) attempted to revive a scheme whereby Africans would be encouraged to grow cane in the reserves. The Director of Native Agriculture estimated that there were 100 000 acres that could be made available in the reserves of Zululand for the growing of cane and that "...in his opinion, 10 acres of cane is sufficient to provide a Native with a good living".<sup>85</sup> The Department gazetted regulations in the *Government Gazette*<sup>86</sup> whereby reserve land would be set aside for Africans to grow cane. The holdings were to be limited to between 10 and 15 acres, and cattle holdings were also to be limited. The Department would grant the land rent-free for the first year, but thereafter an annual rent of £1 per holding was to be paid. Africans who had already planted cane

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82. CAD, NEC, K26 F14, Evidence of Frederick Rodseth, Eshowe, 30 September 1930, pp. 1945 - 1946.

83. This was certainly the perception of Chief Josiah Mqwebu. In a petition presented to the visiting Chief Native Commissioner, Mr J M Young, Mqwebu (through Charles Goodenough Nxaba) complained of the activities of the Melville Sugar Company in the following terms: "We humbly plead for your intervention, Sir, because the said Millers surely get the upper hand of us, leaving us practically indigent despite our large cane fields." *Ilanga lase Natal*, 15 July 1932. The CNC appears to have been swayed by representations of this sort, for opening the Inanda Agricultural Show, he said that Native farmers were "overwhelmed in debt" and that some millers "had taken advantage of their lack of capital". *Ilanga lase Natal*, 22 July 1932.

84. At this stage this is only a hypothesis. Much more work will have to be done, especially with company records, to give concrete substance to this suggestion.

85. Report of NEC, p. 43, para. 301.

86. Union of South Africa, *Government Gazette*, 30 January 1931, Proclamation 42/1931.

in the newly demarcated areas were to be allowed to continue for their lifetimes, subject to a levy of 6d per ton of cane crushed.<sup>87</sup> Cash advances not exceeding £20 p.a. would also be provided for Africans to acquire the necessary tools and seed.<sup>88</sup> The *SASJ* outlined similar attempts in the past, pointing out that "...they have all resulted in a complete failure".<sup>89</sup> Previous schemes, initiated at a time when prices were high, had been expected to give African growers on similar acreages of land an annual income of between £50 and £60 per annum.<sup>90</sup> In the prevailing conditions of the early 1930s, with prices falling, the new scheme was greeted with considerable scepticism.<sup>91</sup>

Although the Natives have lived and worked amongst cane for scores of years, and have sufficient experience and training to do the necessary work, yet very few of them have planted cane to any extent. The mind of the average Native does not progress far beyond superintending the cultivating of a patch of mielies or kaffir corn...With the present overproduction under serious consideration, and the restricting of planting, this proposal from the NNC [Natal Native Commissioner] comes, in any case, at an inopportune time. But apart from that, a Native would be very fortunate under present day conditions, if he could get a profit of £20 p.a. from his holding, which would not be a sufficient inducement for any Native to engage in sugar growing, even if that were the only consideration.<sup>92</sup>

It is obvious that white growers did not wish to see further cane coming onto an already satiated market; the fact that the cane was to be grown by Africans was an aggravating factor. Most white growers did not want Africans as competitors, only as labourers.<sup>93</sup> However, despite the protestations of the *Sugar Journal*, even £20 p.a., while it might not have been an attractive incentive for white farmers, would have been very attractive to African producers in the reserves, who had few

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87. *Ibid.*

88. *SASJ*, February 1931, p. 77.

89. *Ibid.*

90. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

91. *Ibid.*, pp. 89 - 91. This was termed "...an old abandoned dream".

92. *Ibid.*, pp. 77 - 79.

93. CAD, NEC, K26 F14, Evidence of George Herbert Hulett, (Chairman of the Victoria County Planters' Association), Stanger, 2 October 1930, p. 2006.

other means of generating cash from agriculture. Furthermore, their initial production costs would be partially or entirely met. Some 7 293 acres in the reserves were proclaimed.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, as the harvesting of cane would only take place some years after the initial clearing, and planting of the ratoons, this scheme could not do anything meaningful to relieve the plight of Africans in the reserves during the depression years, and its progress has therefore not been described in detail. It is known that a number of African producers were granted quotas under the Sugar Act of 1936, but sugar-cane cultivation did not enjoy widespread popularity, especially after 1936, when restrictions on production were introduced. As late as 1944, there were only 13 283 acres under cane in the reserves.<sup>95</sup>

What is quite clear is that during the depression, even though the price obtainable for cane fluctuated tremendously, and the entire industry suffered through overproduction and the government's manipulation of the gold standard, some Africans in the reserves had identified the potential of sugar-cane as a cash-generating crop and continued to plant and harvest cane, despite obstacles placed in their way by their white counterparts. What must be borne in mind, however, is that areas planted to cane did reduce the amount of land available for cattle and indeed, for life-sustaining crops. Africans who planted cane, therefore, must have had alternative sources of income, or more land under cultivation than was planted to cane. The only alternative conclusion is that collusion with millers-cum-planters was lucrative enough to sustain the African inhabitants of the reserves engaged in the cultivation of sugar-cane.

### **Livestock**

Whatever importance was attached by the African people of Natal to food crops was largely overshadowed by the central role which livestock, particularly cattle, played in their lives.<sup>96</sup> Cattle formed the basis of many cultural and religious ceremonies

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94. Report of NEC, p. 43, para. 301.

95. Brookes and Hurwitz, *Natives Reserves*, pp. 108 - 109.

96. See Report of the NEC, p. 6, para. 33, where the Commission details evidence in this regard. Mrs Hoernlé is quoted as having said: "The cattle are a trust to the present generation from the past generation: they are a medium between the people who are here and those who are no

in traditional society and were inextricably bound up in rituals and practices associated with marriage.<sup>97</sup> Cattle were more than wealth, De Kiewiet asserted:

To sell them or to eat them was a step away from the ways of their fathers against which the spirit of the tribe continued to struggle. They were a cult. Some of the serious economic consequences of 'cow worship' amongst the Hindus of British India could, therefore, also be observed amongst the Bantu. The ban upon killing cattle for food was much less severe in South Africa, but the cattle cult had the same result of permitting many thousands of wretched and useless beasts to batten upon the slender resources of the land. Cattle were hoarded like money. They became more a measure of their owner's dignity than a source of income or profit...Thus their two principal assets, their cattle and their land, continued to stand in an unproductive and damaging relationship to each other.<sup>98</sup>

Cope likewise stressed the importance of cattle:

In the hands of the overwhelming majority of the Zulu, money was only useful as a medium of exchange — cattle produced valuable by-products (milk, hide, dung for fertilizer), and could be used for ploughing, and could be slaughtered for food. Moreover, cattle could reproduce themselves and thus they were a potentially generative form of wealth. Money, to the Zulu, was not: capitalist enterprise was extraneous to Zulu cultural traditions.<sup>99</sup>

The economic value of cattle has been highlighted by Lenta, who accurately pointed out that:

The social system of the African community is bound up in the closest possible manner with livestock ownership. Livestock, and cattle in particular, fulfil certain functions which are probably even more important than the obvious economic ones of acting as a source of income and as a factor of production; livestock is regarded as a store of wealth and as a medium of

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longer here, as the Natives put it...They are heirlooms; emblems of the status of the family..."

97. See Cope, *To Bind the Nation*, pp. 26 - 33, for a discussion on the changing role of cattle in Zulu society in the early twentieth century.

98. De Kiewiet, *History*, p. 198 - 199.

99. Cope, *To Bind the Nation*, p. 27.

exchange. Acquisition of livestock is probably the most important form of investment in the homelands of South Africa and is the customary method of amassing wealth. Precluded from buying land and often unable to canalize their savings into industrial or commercial enterprises, Africans indulge in excessive investment in stock, often preferring number to quality; the possession of livestock in itself gives weight and dignity to the owner. The productive capacity of the stock is often of little significance.<sup>100</sup>

Cattle of the Sanga variety had long been part of Zulu life but, by the time of the depression, most herds in the reserves consisted of cross-breeds, the offspring of these cattle and "nondescript" European cattle. The only cattle which appear to have been carefully bred were the pure-white type associated with royalty and the type known as the Black Nguni, which was very hardy and a good producer of both milk and beef.<sup>101</sup> The huge herds which had grazed the lands of the Zulu in the nineteenth century had been decimated by plunder and disease, causing widespread disruption of the social system.<sup>102</sup> By the second decade of the twentieth century, however, the numbers had begun to recover somewhat,<sup>103</sup> largely as a result of a compulsory dipping programme instituted by the Union government to combat east coast fever (a tick-borne disease), and restrictions upon the movement of stock to curtail the spread of nagana (a disease spread by the tsetse fly). As the NEC reported:

The ruthless efficiency of the white veterinarians increased the numbers of the Native cattle and quarantine regulations limited access to the market, even in the small degree in which the Native was prepared to sell.<sup>104</sup>

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100. G Lenta, *Development or Stagnation? Agriculture in KwaZulu*, University of Natal, Durban, Department of Economics, Occasional Paper No. 7, 1978, p. 17.

101. Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, p. 112.

102. See Cope, *To Bind the Nation*, pp. 27 - 30, where Cope discusses changes wrought to the *lobola* system as a result of cattle shortages, and the social dislocation that followed the increased rate of migrancy associated with this shortage.

103. Cope, "Zulu Royal Family", p. 235. Cope argues that the livestock population growth far outstripped that of humans in Zululand in the period 1916-1936. Furthermore, on white farms just outside the reserves, cattle numbers were increasing at the rate of 11 per cent per annum during the mid-1920s.

104. Report of the NEC, p. 10, para. 67.



This "ruthless efficiency" had not been accompanied by any measures "to teach the Natives to husband their grazing"<sup>105</sup> and the resultant overstocking had led, almost inevitably, to over-grazing and the creation of "near desert conditions" in some areas.<sup>106</sup>

Cattle were found in all the reserves of Natal and Zululand, despite the large differences in climate, veld and potential endemic diseases.<sup>107</sup> Only in the far-flung reaches of Zululand, where the tsetse fly made nagana almost endemic, were cattle numbers small.<sup>108</sup> The higher ground in Zululand, particularly in the savannah and thornveld areas, was eminently suitable for cattle, and supported large herds. In the reserves of Natal proper, the population densities of humans and cattle showed a remarkable correlation.<sup>109</sup> In the reserves of southern Natal, there were areas which were described as having grass "...so bad that not even the goats will eat it". Thornton said this area extended from Mid-Illovo right down to Port Shepstone and there was hardly any grazing left due to overstocking.<sup>110</sup> In most reserves in Natal, there were between 30 and 40 head of cattle per morgen, but there were areas in which this figure rose to more than 50.<sup>111</sup> This was partly as a result of the fact that there were few other investment opportunities open to Africans in the reserves; cattle formed the basis of their savings.<sup>112</sup>

Significantly, cattle holdings were not evenly distributed amongst the population of the reserves. Many impoverished Africans owned no cattle at all, while in some areas individuals owned large herds — sometimes as large as three or four hundred head. These owners used their influence to obtain more land for their cattle, at the

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105. *Ibid.*, para. 68.

106. *Ibid.*, p. 11, para. 73.

107. Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, p. 112.

108. *Ibid.*, p. 114, where a map is provided to show tsetse fly infestations.

109. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

110. CAD, NEC, K26, F15, Evidence of R W Thornton, Pretoria, 3 June 1931, p. 8432.

111. Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, p. 112 - 113. Brookes and Hurwitz assert that the numbers of cattle in the reserves remained largely unchanged between 1930 and 1950, so although their study is largely of a later period, their statistics, in the absence of others, have been employed.

112. Lipton, "South Africa: Two Agricultures?", pp. 76 - 77.

expense of others. Chiefs were able to reserve the best land for their own use because they controlled access to land.<sup>113</sup>

Thornton stated that the reserves in the Union were carrying four times the stock they ought to have done,<sup>114</sup> a very conservative estimate that obviously took no account of the terrain, the carrying capacity of the veld, and endemic diseases. Brookes and Hurwitz argue that the "generally accepted" true carrying capacity of the veld was one beast on every ten morgen, which then greatly increases the overstocking factor.<sup>115</sup> Even some of the reserves in Zululand, which carried small numbers of cattle, were also overstocked, if the quality of the veld was taken into account.<sup>116</sup> Generally, the quality of the veld and the other factors related to the carrying capacity of the reserves do not appear to have been considered either by the NEC, or by many who gave evidence before it, for the Commission decided that although the reserves of Natal were overstocked and denuded, those of Zululand were not.<sup>117</sup> This is obviously a generalisation, but one which may have had applicability as the Commission reported that some whites had been taking advantage of the situation by grazing their herds on reserve land in Zululand at this time.

These cattle were known as *sisá'd* stock after an old African custom of "loaning" stock among clan members. White farmers would approach Africans for grazing and, in return for the milk and a portion of the natural increase, the Africans would tend the herds running on their reserve land. It was, the Secretary of Native Affairs averred, most profitable:

This is the most profitable form of farming for the European, especially in parts of Zululand where the pasture is not overstocked. He can run hundreds of head of cattle at practically no cost, as neither rent on land nor labour costs have to be met, at the same time the custom may benefit

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113. Cope, "Zulu Royal Family", pp. 239 - 241.

114. CAD, NEC, K26, F15, Evidence of R W Thornton at Pretoria on 3 June 1931, p. 8427.

115. Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, p. 112.

116. *Ibid.*

117. Report of the NEC, p. 44, para. 306.

impoverished Native families, and is one to which the Natives themselves are much attached.<sup>118</sup>

The extent of this could not be determined, as both parties to such agreements would simply disclaim ownership, but at the time the Secretary of Native Affairs claimed that the practice was not widespread, as:

Generally speaking Native Locations are so congested and overrun with scrub cattle, that there is no inducement for the European farmer or stockowner to place his cattle in the locations.<sup>119</sup>

It is strange that the Department of Native Affairs, which laid down tight restrictions on the numbers of stock that other Europeans (traders and missionaries) were allowed to keep in the reserves, should allow this situation to continue at all. One possibility may lie in the explanation offered: that the practice was assisting destitute African families and was simply subtly altering the patron-client relationship which had traditionally existed in Zulu society. In any event, the NEC recommended that this practice be stopped.<sup>120</sup> Mr G Kirby, Superintendent of Native Reserves, Nongoma, wrote that the practice was ending anyway as "...during the last four or five years from three thousand to four thousand head of European-owned cattle have been removed from Native areas in this District".<sup>121</sup> But the files of the Chief Native Commissioner, Pietermaritzburg, show that although there was indeed a diminution of the practice, there were still thousands of head of European-owned cattle in the reserves. Instructions were given that all such cattle be removed from the reserves as soon as possible.<sup>122</sup> There is no evidence that *sisa* was in any way influenced by the depression, but the practice was definitely taking place on land that could have been used by the many thousands who were desperately seeking land. Mr J S Marwick MP had also made use of this system to graze his cattle without cost to himself and, despite being ordered to remove his cattle, managed to keep over 400 head in the No. 12 Reserve at Nongoma until 1933.<sup>123</sup>

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118. *Ibid.*, Annexure 12, p. 267.

119. *Ibid.*, p. 268.

120. *Ibid.*, p. 19, para. 123.

121. NAD, CNC, Vol. 42A, File 39/3 (Part I), G Kirby (Superintendent, Native Reserves, Nongoma), to Native Commissioner, Nongoma, 10 August 1932.

122. See NAD, CNC, Vol. 42A, File 39/3 (Part I).

The following table reflects the number of African-owned cattle in the reserves. Unfortunately, despite compulsory dipping (which was recorded) no figures could be found for the years 1931-1933.

**Table 6.5**  
**Cattle holdings in the reserves of Natal, 1926/7 to 1935/36**

Year	Number
1926/27	1 097 477
1927/28	1 171 263
1928/29	1 232 010
1929/30	1 274 850
1933/34	1 143 646
1934/35	1 200 015
1935/36	1 188 177

**Source:** Adapted from Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, p. 119.

The decline between 1929/30 and 1933/34 can largely be ascribed to losses suffered during the droughts of 1931 and 1933. Despite the fact that the Zulu were accustomed to losing large numbers of cattle through drought and disease,<sup>124</sup> the situation in Zululand was so desperate in the former year that the Minister of Native Affairs, Mr E G Jansen, (M.P. for Vryheid) informed Parliament that 203 326 Zulu cattle had died in the period from June to November 1931 alone.<sup>125</sup> This left the Africans not only impoverished, but starving, and the NAD was forced to declare the inland reserves of Zululand famine areas and to distribute maize against promissory notes, in what Cope termed "an unprecedented move".<sup>126</sup>

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123. NAD, CNC, Vol. 42A, File CNC 39/3, Secretary of Native Affairs (SNA) to CNC, 15 November 1933.

124. *Handbook*, Table 23, p. 37. The average annual loss of cattle in all the reserves of Natal and Zululand between 1926 and 1930 was in the order of 50 000 head. See also CAD, K26, F4, Evidence of Charles Wheelwright, former Native Commissioner for Zululand, Mtubatuba, 25 September 1930, p. 1738, where he states that thousands of head of stock died annually from nagana in the Umfolozi, Hluhluwe and Umkooi areas.

125. Debates of the House of Assembly, (hereafter Hansard), Col. 5106, 23 May 1932.

126. Cope, *To Bind the Nation*, p. 262. These efforts will be described in detail in Chapter Eight.

The decline in cattle numbers cannot be ascribed to any large-scale sell-off of stock during the economic crisis. While the cattle auctions organised by the NAD and cattle traders at Eshowe, Vryheid and Nongoma were "popular",<sup>127</sup> these had hardly any impact on the herds. There appears to have been a very well-entrenched white view that attempts to get Africans to sell their surplus stock, through organised auctions, had met with little success.<sup>128</sup> As the NEC put it, "It is difficult for a Native to sell cattle in cold blood."<sup>129</sup> Even in the most trying of economic circumstances, Africans simply refused to sell their stock, or sold only the most emaciated and unhealthy specimens:

At that time, [1931] although the natives were short of food, they would not sell their cattle for a reasonable price. When the speculators left off buying, the magistrates were approached by the natives with a request to find buyers for their stock. The outcome was that it was decided to hold auction sales at various places. Somehow the word got round that the Government was buying their cattle and that any kind would do. The result was that a general culling was carried out and the very worst of cattle, with a few exceptions, were sent to the market. I know one native who sent a cow that was so weak that he could not drive it back after he failed to sell it.<sup>130</sup>

Some of the poor prices obtained in the auction described by "Observer" were also a cause of concern for Africans. He reported the following sentiments being expressed:

‘They have just come to grab our cattle’; ‘The Government is trying to take all our cattle because they say we have too many, and that is why we won’t work’; ‘I’ll take my cow and kill it rather than take £2 for her. Why! a sheep is £1; and do they think our cattle are sheep?’<sup>131</sup>

The overstocking of most of the reserves, and the general reluctance of Africans to sell their cattle, even in the direst circumstances, was a source of continuing

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127. Cope, "The Zulu Royal Family", p. 236.

128. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of F J Carless (Mooi River Farmers' Association), Mooi River, at Estcourt, 13 October 1930, p. 2306.

129. Report of the NEC, p. 16, para. 106.

130. Letter from "Observer" of Matubatuba [sic] to *The Farmer*, 8 April 1932, p. 23.

131. *Ibid.*

frustration to those in authority and, in fact, to all those interested in the land.<sup>132</sup> However, while most of the Zulu could not be brought to part with their cattle in return for cash, they were prepared to part with them as tribute to their king, Solomon.

Cope stated that "tens of thousands of cattle" were collected as tribute between 1931 and early 1933. These were then sold by white cattle-dealers to pay Solomon's debts.<sup>133</sup> Even those who had wanted to make use of the auction sales organised by magistrates and the NAD, were persuaded by agents of Solomon not to sell there, but to entrust cattle to them as they would sell directly to the market in Durban and the owners would receive better returns. In the event, however, only the agents and, to a much lesser degree, Solomon, benefited from these sales.<sup>134</sup> These demands, at a time of crisis for most Zulus, cost Solomon support from even his most loyal subjects.<sup>135</sup> The government, through the NAD, was understandably outraged, for even as they were distributing famine relief and writing off thousands of pounds in arrear taxes,<sup>136</sup> not only were Solomon's agents collecting cattle, but the king

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132. As late as 1935 the NAD reported: "It cannot be claimed that either the propaganda of the Department or the fostering of cattle sales had yet had any appreciable affect on the overstocking of the Native areas of Natal and Zululand. Even the more enlightened Natives nearly all keep as many cattle as will keep alive on the common grazing regardless of their condition." Quoted in Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, p. 115.

133. Cope, *To Bind the Nation*, pp. 263 - 264. Cope appears to have overlooked the evidence in NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 92A, File 64/7, relating to the Zulu National Deputation Fund. This file contains the docket prepared by the South African Police who were asked to investigate the whole matter of cattle collections to ascertain whether these were being obtained fraudulently. The investigating officer, Detective Sergeant Claysmith, came to the conclusion that between 2 000 and 3 000 cattle had been given to Solomon and that although Solomon had denied that the cattle collectors were acting on his behalf, the persons concerned had signed permission from Solomon to do so. See the docket forwarded to the Divisional Criminal Investigation Officer, Pietermaritzburg, 6 September 1932. However, it is indeed quite likely that many more cattle were collected than could be traced by the Investigating Officer, which makes Cope's assertion quite probable. The same conclusion is reached by La Hausse. See La Hausse, "Ethnicity and History", pp. 325 - 331. La Hausse does make use of the file in question. I had uncovered and made use of the file independently.

134. The exact extent of the tribute paid to Solomon in the form of cattle and the extent of the appropriation by "agents" acting on his behalf during this period shall probably never be known; there is simply not sufficient data (in any form) existant to reach a definitive conclusion.

135. Cope, *To Bind the Nation*, p. 265.

136. The exact sum involved in this action cannot be ascertained, but the action itself should be seen as a measure of the seriousness of the situation.

himself continued to spend liberally, even buying an expensive new car — all the time getting himself deeper and deeper into debt.<sup>137</sup>

Other cattle trends were also serious. The birth-rate among cows was falling; the average number of calves borne per cow had fallen from between 15 and 20 to only 7 or 8, as a consequence of their poor condition and the lack of grazing.<sup>138</sup> Milk production, always dependent on the weather and the quality of grazing, was negatively affected by the poor environment. This had serious consequences for many children who were largely reared on a diet of milk.<sup>139</sup> Even the market for skins and hides, which had often provided African families with a small but steady cash income, ceased to provide the customary returns as a result of the depression. This had serious consequences, for even in the worst of times when cattle had died of drought or disease, the sale of the hide of a dead beast provided an income. Often this was the only income that could be obtained from such an animal. Another source of money for the hard-pressed subsistence farmers had virtually dried up.<sup>140</sup>

Overall, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that the depression years, accompanied as they were by severe droughts, had a very negative impact on the cattle holdings of the Zulu people and, therefore, on the daily lives of the inhabitants of the reserves. Most of the reserves were overstocked, and the grazing under severe pressure. It is not surprising, therefore, that the losses of cattle through drought and disease were considerable. Dube put it thus:

The wheel has now turned the other way about. Locations and reserves are congested. Drought, dongas, wasteful methods of cultivation, destruction of vegetation thus reducing the moisture-absorbing power of the pasture, are now common. Added to this, outbreaks of stock diseases, hitherto unknown,

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137. *Ibid.*, pp. 266 - 267.

138. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Frederick Rodseth at Eshowe on 30 September 1930, p. 1954.

139. Report of the NEC, p. 14, para. 92.

140. For discussion of the effects of the depression on the market for hides and skins, see Chapter Five.

have caused our people financial embarrassment...It [livestock] has now so increased that there is not enough pasture. Large numbers are dying off, and people are becoming impoverished. Even those who have stock now derive no income during this time of depression.<sup>141</sup>

Such losses brought great hardship, suffering and social upheaval in their wake, and were exacerbated by the predations of the Zulu king and his agents. However, one must not paint too bleak a picture, for once the rains came and the veld regenerated, so did the herds. Indeed, as Brookes and Hurwitz noted:

... a precarious equilibrium has been reached between cattle numbers and the carrying capacity of the veld. This balance is easily upset and many cattle are lost from disease and drought. The balance is, however, quickly regained in favourable years by natural increase and by purchase.<sup>142</sup>

The drought also had a significant effect on African holdings of sheep. Although few areas of the reserves were really suitable for woolled sheep, relatively good prices during the 1920s (even for poor-quality wool) had encouraged a steady rise in holdings of woolled sheep; holdings of non-woolled sheep, (kept largely for mutton) also increased. During the drought, however, large numbers of the former perished and declining prices for wool forced a changeover to the more hardy mutton sheep.

**Table 6.6**  
**African Holdings of Woolled and Non-Woolled Sheep in the Reserves of Natal and Zululand, 1926 to 1935.**

Year	Woolled	Non-Woolled	Total
1926	68 000	179 000	247 000
1927	71 000	204 000	275 000
1928	78 000	212 000	290 000
1929	88 000	229 000	317 000
1930	90 000	220 000	310 000
1934	68 000	184 000	252 000
1935	70 000	242 000	312 000

**Source:** Adapted from *Handbook*, Table 15, p. 26.

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141. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Statement of Evidence submitted by the Revd J L Dube, Durban, 2 April 1931, pp. 6 - 7.

142. Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, p. 115.



In concert with their white counterparts, African wool farmers in the reserves continued to produce wool during the depression years and, even though the prices fell,<sup>143</sup> production was more or less maintained. Unfortunately, because of the stopping of agricultural censuses, no figures are available for the crucial years 1931-1933, nor was any distinction drawn between the production of Africans in the reserves and the production of Africans on white farms:

**Table 6.7**  
**Production of Wool by Africans in Natal, 1925 to 1934**

Year	Quantity (in 1 000lbs)
1925	139
1926	150
1927	225
1928	237
1929	278
1930	266
1934	273

**Source:** *Handbook*, Table 32, p. 48.

The overall trend in the numbers of sheep was an upward one, reflecting the declining ability of the veld to support cattle. While holdings of woolled sheep on white farms decreased in the twenty years from 1930 to 1950, those of Africans continued to increase. In 1930, African holdings constituted 3,4 per cent of the total provincial holding; by 1950, this had risen to 10,3 per cent.<sup>144</sup> More significant than the holdings of sheep of both kinds was the pattern of the ownership of goats.

Both sheep and goats, because of their grazing patterns, effect greater damage to pasture than cattle. But apart from their destructive feeding habits, their possession is most often a sign of poverty, as Brookes and Hurwitz argued:

There are more goats than any other livestock in the Reserves. They are of little economic value, but are slaughtered sometimes for food and sometimes for ritual purposes. Their presence can often be regarded as an indication of poverty in

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143. See previous chapter for price fluctuations.

144. Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, p. 117.

the families that own them, for to own goats is often to be unable to afford cattle.<sup>145</sup>

There existed a strong correlation between the population density of goats and soil erosion. As goats were able to subsist on very poor grazing, the heaviest concentrations of these animals were to be found in those areas which were the most eroded and poverty-stricken in the reserves.<sup>146</sup>

**Table 6.8**  
**African Holdings of Goats other than Angora,**  
**in the Reserves of Natal and Zululand, 1926 - 1935**

Year	Number
1926	656 000
1927	837 000
1928	905 000
1929	994 000
1930	869 000
1934	740 000
1935	779 000

**Source:** *Handbook*, Table 17, p. 31.

The drought and the rising tide of poverty in the reserves had a very negative effect on the numbers of goats; many died of disease or in the drought.<sup>147</sup> Many others must have met their fate under the butcher's knife, as goats were often eaten as a source of protein during desperate times. The NAD was also actively promoting the reduction of the goat population, although with relatively little success.<sup>148</sup>

High prices for mohair during the 1920s had occasioned a significant rise in the number of angora goats in the reserves during the late 1920s, and the sale of mohair by Africans rose as a consequence. In 1926/27 there were some 1 300 angora goats in the reserves; by 1929/30, this had increased to 2 761, an increase of 112 per cent. Some 2 713 lbs of mohair were sold in 1928/29.<sup>149</sup> However, the onset of the

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145. *Ibid.*

146. *Ibid.*

147. *Handbook*, Table 26, p. 39. 98 000 sheep and goats were lost in 1930 alone.

148. Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, pp. 117 - 118. By 1950 numbers had fallen to 702 888.

149. *Ibid.*, p. 118 - 119.

depression and the subsequent collapse of the mohair market ended the interest of African farmers in this activity and the numbers of such goats declined to almost nothing.<sup>150</sup>

The period of the depression, coinciding as it did with two severe droughts, encompassed years of hardship for most African families resident in the reserves of Natal. Overstocking and overpopulation had reduced some areas to near-desert; even some fifty years later, Ndeshini kaMnyaiza still recalled that in the aftermath of the drought in the Nongoma and Mahlatini areas, a snake could be seen moving across the other side of the valley, for there was no grass left at all.<sup>151</sup> When the predations of locusts and the sporadic outbreaks of various livestock diseases are added and the serious outbreaks of malaria<sup>152</sup> are also included in the picture, there can be no doubt that for many of the inhabitants of the reserves, the early years of the 1930s were years of privation and hardship.

This makes it easier to take issue with the analysis of reserve production produced by Simkins.<sup>153</sup> Simkins, in analysing reserve production argued that in 1927, some reserves in Zululand were almost self-sufficient in food production, while some of the reserves of Natal proper produced less than 25 per cent of their required food.<sup>154</sup> However, in referring to Zululand, Cope pointed out the flaw in Simkins's analysis:

...the relative prosperity of many Zulu in the reserves masks the fact that very many more were becoming acutely impoverished. Simkins' conclusions are based on statistics

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150. *Handbook*, Table 17, p. 31. The figures supplied in the *Handbook* do not coincide with those of Brookes and Hurwitz. The former suggests that there were 4 000 angora goats in 1928; 2 000 in 1929 and 3 000 in 1933. Thereafter the numbers decline to below 1 000. Although the figures do not agree, the overall trend is the same; another example of the vagaries of the statisticians.

151. Cope, "Zulu Royal Family", p. 235.

152. For a fuller discussion of this see J B Brain, "But Only the Black Men Die: The 1929-33 Malaria Epidemics in Natal and Zululand", Paper presented at Workshop on Natal History, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1988.

153. C Simkins, "Agricultural Production in the African Reserves of South Africa, 1918-1969", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 7, 1981, pp. 256 - 283.

154. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

arrived at by dividing the value of agricultural production in the Zululand reserves as a whole by population figures.<sup>155</sup>

Furthermore, the evidence suggests that at least for the period 1929 to 1934, the reserves of Zululand were less able to support their populations than simple statistical computations would have one believe. This does not detract from Simkins's overall conclusions, but again highlights the fact that statistical studies over long periods of time might not always give an accurate reflection of the situation that prevailed in particular component years. Simkins himself admits that the fragile maintenance of a productive base in the reserves was assisted by the migration of a significant number of their inhabitants, which alleviated some of the problems of overcrowding and partly relieved the pressure on limited resources. According to Brookes and Hurwitz, the situation had not improved by the 1950s, at which time there were only a few areas (in Zululand) that could support a normal subsistence population, while there were other areas (mainly in the Natal reserves) which carried populations more than 20 times greater than the normal subsistence population.<sup>156</sup>

There is abundant evidence to confirm that, during the depression years, poor economic conditions encouraged white farmers in Natal to evict African tenants and labourers from their farms in order to boost productivity and profitability.<sup>157</sup> Bradford described the situation in the following terms:

Countrywide between 1926 and 1936, the number of Africans on white-owned farms rose more slowly than the general population increase, while the reverse was true of black-owned farms and towns. The most striking shifts occurred in Natal. Here the proportion of Africans on holdings owned or occupied by non-Africans remained almost static in absolute terms, and fell dramatically from 41 to 26 per cent of the province's total African population. Simultaneously, numbers in the reserves increased by almost one-quarter; on African-owned holdings they doubled; and in towns they more than trebled.<sup>158</sup>

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155. Cope, "Zulu Royal Family", p. 239.

156. Brookes and Hurwitz, *Native Reserves*, p. 127, Figure 25.

157. See Chapter Five and La Hausse, "Ethnicity and History", pp. 280 - 281 and p. 321; Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom*, pp. 34 - 62.

158. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom*, p. 59.

Bradford intimated the areas in which such displaced Africans did eventually find homes, but the picture is not as simple as might appear from a survey over ten years. In the short term, such displaced Africans had to find somewhere to live and some means of staying alive. Most white farmers were not hiring or acquiring new labour tenants, even under conditions of labour that can only be described as being akin to slavery.<sup>159</sup> Alternative employment on white farms was therefore scarce and unrewarding. So desperate were many that they sought work in the sugar industry. This avenue of employment was generally very unpopular with the Zulu, but the industry reported that during the depression their perennial labour shortages were somewhat alleviated.<sup>160</sup>

The operation of the "civilised labour" policy and the general economic downturn in the urban areas of Natal also resulted in large-scale African unemployment and consequently, in a forced movement of Africans from the urban to the rural areas.<sup>161</sup> It seemed after all, as John Dube put it:

...that you want our labour, but as soon as you have finished with us you want us removed so far away from you that you do not want to see us until certain hours when you again want our labour.<sup>162</sup>

The depression had adversely affected the position of the urban African.<sup>163</sup> Dube had said previously:

[Urban Africans] should have land to flee to in case of whatever troubles they may have in the urban areas. At the

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159. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 12 February 1932.

160. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of Douglas Saunders, Acting Chairman of the Natal Millers' Association, Durban, 2 April 1931, p. 6220.

161. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Shiyahanye Mncwango, Nongoma, 22 September 1930, p. 1696, where he said: "We have several things to represent in regard to native labour; certain conditions which have been brought about by the authorities lately have come down heavily upon us; I refer to the natives who have lost the work which they had on the railways. There were many natives deprived of their living that way on the railways, and it seems to us that the Government, instead of helping their subjects to make a living, are creating poor blacks..."

162. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of the Revd J L Dube, Durban, 2 April 1931, p. 6263.

163. See above, Chapter Three.

present time, you want to send away Natives to Native areas, but the Native areas are congested. You do not want Natives in the urban areas; and when you have not got land, where can they go?<sup>164</sup>

This must have been the question that faced thousands of displaced Africans during the depression period. It appears that many did attempt to find their way back to the reserves, but in most cases, the congestion, and the generally desperate conditions pertaining in many of the reserves, made it economically impossible for them to return to their own land, or that of their families, to eke out a living. The reserves simply could not sustain such an influx; conditions within them were, in fact, obliging many resident Africans to leave the reserves in search of paid employment to sustain themselves and their families during the crisis. Africans in the reserves often resented the intrusion of others from outside, knowing that the land could not support more people.<sup>165</sup> Many were forced back to the urban areas where they lived illegally, often at the mercy of Indian slumlords.<sup>166</sup> The influx to the towns could not be stopped merely by the passing of acts of parliament.<sup>167</sup>

The depression and the resultant hardship reported by the NEC can be taken as one of the factors that motivated the Hertzog government to allocate additional land to the reserves in 1936.<sup>168</sup> Plans for the development of the reserves were also mooted, but these came too late to assist the many thousands of destitute Africans who bore the full brunt of the depression. Harried from pillar to post, from urban areas and white farms to the desolate backwaters of the reserves, exploited by storekeepers and even their king, the African population felt the fullest effects of the depression and the resultant impoverishment.

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164. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of the Revd J L Dube, Durban, 2 April 1931, p. 6230.

165. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of H C Lugg, Durban, 1 April 1931, pp. 6150, 6175.

166. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of H C Lugg, Durban, 1 April 1931, p. 6176.

167. Lacey, *Boroko*, p. 274.

168. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### UNEMPLOYMENT IN NATAL

*No man has hired us  
With pocketed hands  
and covered faces  
We stand about in open places  
and shiver in unlit rooms.  
Only the wind moves  
Over empty fields, untilled  
Where the plough rests, at an angle to the furrow.  
In this land  
There shall be one cigarette to two men,  
To two women one half pint of bitter ale.  
In this land  
No man has hired us  
Our life is unwelcome, our death  
Unmentioned in "The Times".*

T S Eliot, *The Rock*, 1934.

Unemployment was perhaps the most noticeable result of the great depression throughout the western world. Hardly any nation was unaffected by this phenomenon, but the populous industrialised nations of Europe and the United States of America suffered more severely from this dislocation of the normal order, as millions of workers were rendered jobless and thronged the streets vainly attempting to secure any form of employment which would restore their pride and self-confidence. Unemployment of such magnitude in these countries was unprecedented: the modern economic system had never before failed on such a massive scale. In Europe the worst affected country was undoubtedly Germany, where the jobless numbered 7 000 000 by the end of 1932,<sup>1</sup> in Great Britain, some 2 745 000 were likewise unemployed in the same year,<sup>2</sup> while in the United States of America, 12 830 000 or 24,7 per cent of the workforce were unemployed in 1933.<sup>3</sup> In France, which had managed to resist the depression until much later, some 1 300 000 workers were unemployed by 1933.<sup>4</sup> While not experiencing the same

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1. Heaton, *Economic History of Europe*, p. 708.

2. M Beloff, *Wars and Welfare: Britain 1914 - 1945*, Edward Arnold, London, 1984, p. 195.

3. Robertson and Walton, *History of the American Economy*, p. 486.

4. A Cobban, *A History of Modern France*, Vol. 3: 1871 - 1962, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965, p. 138.

degree of joblessness amongst its population, the province of Natal in the Union of South Africa did nevertheless suffer some measure of this great social and economic dislocation.

Before attempting to assess the situation in Natal, it is perhaps prudent to grapple with the problem of defining the term "unemployment". A basic definition was provided by the Holloway Commission, which stated that:

Unemployment is the non-fulfilment of the desire to be employed. Where this desire does not exist, there can be no unemployment.<sup>5</sup>

This basic definition has been followed by other writers such as Pigou<sup>6</sup> and Casson.<sup>7</sup> But as Robertson and Walton point out, there is always a certain measure of unemployment present in capitalist society:

People are said to be 'involuntarily unemployed' when they are willing and able to work but cannot find a job for which they are trained. Some kinds of involuntary unemployment, often referred to as "frictional unemployment," are unavoidable in a free economy... Some businesses have seasonal ups and downs in employment. Technological unemployment occurs as innovations throw people out of work .... And there are always marginal workers who, due to approaching old age or mental or physical disabilities, find themselves continually moving into and out of the workforce. Frictional unemployment cannot be lightly dismissed, but it is not an economic malfunction. Serious unemployment is the mass unemployment that results from sudden, drastic declines in economic activity.<sup>8</sup>

Such a "drastic decline" is indeed the stuff of this study. This type of unemployment is referred to as cyclical unemployment and was the main type of unemployment occasioned by the Great Depression of 1929-1933. The situation in the Union of South Africa was, however, more complex, for in addition to all the other types of unemployment considered above, the Union also experienced structural

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5. Report of the NEC, para. 700.

6. A C Pigou, *Lapses from Full Employment*, MacMillan, London, 1945, p. 1.

7. M Casson, *Youth Unemployment*, MacMillan, London, 1979, p. 2.

8. Robertson and Walton, *History of the American Economy*, p. 485.



unemployment.

Structural unemployment is unemployment that is built into the economic framework of a country. This was, in essence, the cornerstone of the migrant labour system in the Union, for the system was predicated upon the fact that there should always be a reservoir of unemployed African labour in the reserves, which could be tapped when needed. As supply would always exceed demand, wage levels would be kept as low as possible. In other words, there would always be fewer vacancies in the formal sector of the economy than there were potential workers.<sup>9</sup> This complicates any study of unemployment in Natal during the depression years, as such structural unemployment is impossible to quantify. In the populous African reserves of Natal and Zululand, and on the outskirts of some of the major urban centres, there were many people of working age who did not wish to work in the formal sector of the economy and therefore cannot be classed as "unemployed". When circumstances altered drastically, however, many of them were forced to seek employment and only then, when they were unable to secure such employment, could they possibly be classified as "unemployed".

In addition, there were many thousands of Africans who were migrant labourers, moving between either agricultural employment and the towns, or between their rural homes and their urban employment. When the depression struck, many of these people could not find employment in the urban areas to supplement their incomes. The question then arises whether such persons could be termed "unemployed". This issue was neatly resolved by the Hertzog government, in that it simply chose to ignore the plight of the African unemployed in the urban areas. Some largely ineffectual attempts were made, by the Native Affairs Department, to quantify the problem of unemployment in the reserves. The government, however, contented itself with attempting to banish the problem of African unemployment to the rural areas and tightening legislation to make the entry of Africans into urban areas more difficult during the depression years.<sup>10</sup>

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9. See F Wilson, *Migrant Labour in South Africa*, SACC and SPRO-CAS, Johannesburg, 1972, pp. 155 - 185 and C Simkins and D Clarke, *Structural Unemployment in South Africa*, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1978.

10. Two legislative measures serve to illustrate this; the Natives (Urban Areas) Amendment Act of 1930 and the Native Service Contract Act of 1932.

An examination of the economic history of the Union of South Africa will show that, in a normal rhythmic pattern, periods of growth and expansion (boom periods) alternated with periods of decline and stagnation (depressions). The period 1929 to 1933 was an example of the latter, while the years 1933 to 1936, provide an example of the former.<sup>11</sup> Cyclical fluctuations often have a sudden, devastating impact on the economy and thus affect employment severely, as one of the traditional responses to such a fluctuation would be the retrenchment of all or part of the workforce, consequent upon a structural re-organisation of an affected enterprise.<sup>12</sup>

Although some measure of unemployment had been present throughout the history of the Union, unemployment on a large scale was a new phenomenon and the government appointed a Committee to investigate. The Committee found that:

Unemployment is no respecter of race or class, more especially in a period of severe and prolonged depression. It affects the White, the Coloured person, the Indian and also the Native. The intensity and extensiveness is not to be measured by the colour of the worker's skin, but by other factors.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the common concern implied in these lofty sentiments, the government retained its old priorities and focused almost entirely on the unemployment problem as it related to white adult males. When the depression struck, therefore, existing mechanisms, catering largely to white needs, were marshalled to cope with the crisis. These mechanisms operated through the local offices of the Department of Labour in the major urban centres, and the Post Office Exchanges in the rural areas. These acted as labour bureaux, attempting to match prospective workers with employers. They simply registered unemployed white males over the age of 18 years, recorded their previous occupations (if any) and attempted to place such unemployed persons in suitable employment. Although registration of white women took place, no relief works were ever contemplated for them. In fact, scant attention was paid to the

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11. Schumann, *Structural Changes and Business Cycles*, p. 248.

12. See A J V Rörich, "Statistical Analysis of Seasonal Variations in the Economic Life of South Africa", M.Comm. thesis, University of Stellenbosch, 1940.

13. Union of South Africa, *Report of the Unemployment Investigation Committee*, U.G. 30/1932, p. 6.

plight of the unemployed of the other gender or other races. Even for white males registration was not compulsory, as the Union had no unemployment insurance administered by the state until 1937,<sup>14</sup> which meant that the government had no accurate idea of the number of unemployed.

This was the case even for the group which concerned the government most, adult white males. When there seemed to be little likelihood of there being employment in the offing, either on relief works or in the private sector, such unemployed men simply did not bother to register as unemployed, or to renew their monthly registrations.<sup>15</sup> Not only did officials at the local level have an inaccurate picture of the unemployment situation, but such inaccuracies multiplied when statistics were collected centrally. Colonel F H P Cresswell, Minister of Labour, admitted as much when he said that the official figures of registered unemployed did not reflect the true situation, which was twice as bad.<sup>16</sup> This contention was disputed by Mr H P Borlase, a Durban Member of Parliament (MP), who suggested that the government should take the dependants of such unemployed white males into account. The "Borlase formula" multiplied the registered unemployed by five, to account for such dependants, which would have meant that more than a quarter of the white population of Durban was subsisting on charity.<sup>17</sup> This "formula" was itself inaccurate, as the number of dependants was inflated.<sup>18</sup> The evidence presented shows quite clearly that official figures did not reflect the true situation. The government had no real idea of the magnitude of the most serious consequence of the depression, nor did it take adequate steps to quantify this problem.<sup>19</sup>

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14. Davies, *Capital*, p. 90 (note 27) and pp. 316 - 317.

15. See above, p. 30.

16. *Natal Mercury*, 29 September 1931.

17. *Natal Mercury*, 14 March 1932.

18. The Durban Benevolent Society which was the largest charitable organisation in Durban stated that the average number of dependants per case assisted had grown from 1,770 in 1928 to only 2,468 in 1932. *Natal Mercury*, 15 September 1932.

19. It is difficult to explain why this should be so, but it appears that the prevailing parsimony in government may have been partly responsible for the lack of measures taken to collect accurate statistics. Most forms of census-taking were halted during the depression years as an economy measure. Furthermore, although the Hertzog government could in no way be described as one which subscribed to the principles of *laissez-faire*, there was a distinct reluctance to commit the state to any long-term solution to the problem of unemployment, over and above the measures already in operation. It is equally true that most of the

The lack of any other trustworthy statistical evidence means that despite the obvious shortcomings of the official statistics, they remain the only source for the historian. These statistics reveal that at the onset of the depression in 1929, there were already approximately 3 800 white men registered as unemployed in the Union.<sup>20</sup> Registrations increased steadily as the depression worsened and the Employment Index fell almost continuously, reaching its nadir in October 1933, when 39 309 white men were unemployed.<sup>21</sup> In fact, only 13 703 were actually unemployed at that point, the balance being employed on government-subsidised relief works.<sup>22</sup> Relief works were seen as a method of disguising unemployment, for they were not considered a substitute for real long-term employment in the formal sector of the economy. Relief work was thus regarded as inferior and was performed at a reduced rate of wages.<sup>23</sup> If this argument is accepted, figures of those men employed on relief works must be included in any assessment of the unemployment situation.

The various categories of employment in the Union were also affected differently by the depression; taking white males alone, the overwhelming majority of those who registered as unemployed were unskilled, as table 7.1 shows:

**Table 7.1**  
**Percentage Distribution of Unemployed by**  
**Vocational Character of Applicants, 1930-1933.**

Vocation	1930		1931		1932		1933	
	Mar	Sept	Mar	Sept	Mar	Sept	Mar	Sept
Artisans	22,5	25,5	32,4	27,9	27,7	28,1	20,1	13,3
Clerks	4,9	5,7	6,0	8,9	8,5	7,3	4,5	3,4
Unskilled Workers	72,6	68,8	60,7	63,2	63,8	64,6	75,4	83,4

**Source:** Ravenscroft, "Depression", p. 47.

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government were totally inexperienced in finance and financial management and might thus have been caught unawares by the magnitude of the problem.

20. Ravenscroft, "Depression", p. 46.  
21. Davies, *Capital*, p. 247. Recent research by Minnaar put the figure far higher. He stated that in September 1933 approximately 22 per cent of all white and coloured males in the labour

The urban and rural areas of the Union (and indeed of Natal) were also affected differently by the depression and the accompanying drought; the unemployment situation in the urban areas of the Union was worst in September/October 1932, while the rural areas experienced their highest level of unemployment only in September 1933, as a result of the drought, locust infestations and an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease.<sup>24</sup> The unemployed in the rural areas then drifted to the towns, thus aggravating the situation there. The drift to the towns was certainly a factor in Natal's unemployment situation, as will be shown below. The process of urbanisation was indeed greatly accelerated by the depression, the influx into the towns being explained by Mr Tobias, the Divisional Inspector of the Department of Labour for Natal, as follows:

The psychological 'herd instinct' in times of stress may be partly responsible, as it has been made repeatedly clear all over the country that nothing but misery and starvation awaits unemployed men in the towns.<sup>25</sup>

Smith was more sanguine in his reasoning:

...charity and relief are better organised in the towns, so that there is a minimum standard of life (however low) below which urban families rarely sink. This in itself, is an attraction to the depressed classes of the rural community.<sup>26</sup>

Durban appears to have had great attractive powers for the unemployed of the province and indeed, of the Union. As early as 1930, statistics showed that up to 20 per cent of the unemployed in the town had arrived in the province within the

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force, some 188 000 men, were officially registered as unemployed. Minnaar does not give a racial breakdown, but the figures seem far higher than have been generally accepted. See Minnaar, "Unemployment", p. 46.

22. See Ravenscroft, "Depression", p. 47 and Union of South Africa, *Annual Report of the Department of Labour*, U.G. 37 of 1933, p. 5. Again, Minnaar's recent research disputes this figure. See Minnaar, "Unemployment", pp. 56 - 60.
23. See above p. 33.
24. Ravenscroft, "Depression", p. 46.
25. *Natal Mercury*, 14 October 1932.
26. R H Smith, *Labour Resources of Natal*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1950, p. 25.

previous twelve months, while 30 per cent had been previously resident elsewhere in Natal for a period of three years, and only 50 per cent had been resident in Natal (most in Durban) for a period longer than three years.<sup>27</sup> There were constant references in the Durban press to the influx of "outsiders" coming into Durban expecting assistance not only from the Department of Labour but also from the Town Council and charitable organisations. By October 1932, it was reported that 70 unemployed men with families were arriving in Durban every month.<sup>28</sup> In presenting his budget proposals for the following financial year, Councillor George Reyburn claimed that the unemployed present in Durban as at 31 October 1932 represented 86 per cent of all the unemployed of the province of Natal, while this percentage constituted 21 per cent of all the registered unemployed of the entire Union at that point.<sup>29</sup>

The idea that the major urban areas of Natal (and particularly Durban and Pietermaritzburg) were fast becoming the "mecca" of the unemployed of the Union led to measures aimed at making such unemployed persons distinctly unwelcome in these towns; residential qualifications were applied to the provision of assistance in any form. The Natal Provincial Administration (NPA) imposed a residential qualification of two years for employment on its relief works and further discriminated in favour of married men.<sup>30</sup> The Town Council of Durban and the City Council of Pietermaritzburg both imposed similar residential qualifications; in Durban not only did the applicant for employment on the relief works have to have been a resident for at least three years, but he had to have had at least a year's steady employment prior to being retrenched.<sup>31</sup> In Pietermaritzburg the qualification was also three years.<sup>32</sup>

As the depression deepened and the plight of the unemployed grew, so public opinion grew more vociferous about the influx of "foreign" unemployed into the towns, as the letter from "Hors de Combat" illustrates:

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27. *Natal Mercury*, 31 October 1930.

28. *Natal Mercury*, 14 October 1932.

29. *Natal Mercury*, 15 November 1932. Reyburn was obviously only referring to unemployed adult white males.

30. *Natal Mercury*, 16 January 1930.

31. *Natal Mercury*, 4 November 1930.

...I say keep the Free Stater and Transvaler to his own country and let we [*sic*] Natalians get jobs in our own Province...<sup>33</sup>

The Department of Labour did little to halt this influx; Tobias merely reiterated that there was "nothing sinister" in the influx of unemployed men from other parts, as "distance lends enchantment" and that the influx "must be seen as inevitable".<sup>34</sup> Some attempts to place men in employment on relief works even resulted in more men arriving in Durban:

It is regretted that men have been induced to journey to Durban from various parts of the Province and Union to seek employment upon the Provincial roads scheme through the local Inspector of Labour, many of whom were rejected to swell the numbers of unemployed in Durban, while others who were sent to Port Shepstone, Greytown and elsewhere, have left their work and returned to Durban, finding it impossible to live on the average net wage result of 3/3 per man per day, and upon which many of the men are expected to keep their wives and families.<sup>35</sup>

Not only were unemployed whites flocking to the urban areas, but the unemployed of other racial groups were also arriving. The small "coloured" community of Durban, for example, had its unemployment problem exacerbated by the arrival of "coloureds and mixed races" from elsewhere in the Union, "...which naturally has added to the difficulty of employment for local semi-skilled persons".<sup>36</sup> Africans were also coming into the major urban centres in increasing numbers, as the situation in the rural areas deteriorated. It is not possible to give an accurate estimate of the numbers of unemployed African workseekers, but the situation was regarded as so serious that even Mabel Palmer, a staunch opponent of segregation, advocated halting the flood. She declared that steps would have to be taken in the rural areas to stem the tide:

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32. *Natal Witness*, 12 March 1931.

33. *Natal Mercury*, 14 October 1932.

34. *Natal Mercury*, 14 May 1930.

35. *Natal Mercury*, 15 February 1930.

36. *Natal Mercury*, 14 March 1931.

You could improve conditions in the country; you could disseminate information through the magistrates often as to the conditions in Durban.<sup>37</sup>

When asked to elaborate further on what measures she advocated she said:

Send one of their own men around to explain to them what was likely to happen to an unemployed Native in Durban.<sup>38</sup>

Similar evidence was given in Pietermaritzburg by Robert Dunlop, the chairman of the Joint Council and the Native Welfare Society. Dunlop further recommended that Africans be returned to their home districts at provincial expense.<sup>39</sup>

Taking the main urban centre of the province first, it is possible to trace the deepening depression through the ever-increasing number of unemployed white males in Durban. As early as December 1929 there were between 600 and 700 unemployed men in Durban. Included in this number were those too sick to work, habitually unemployed men (often referred to as "stiffs") and temporarily unemployed skilled workers. The situation was described as being "in no way acute".<sup>40</sup> The situation continued thus with minor fluctuations occasioned by men failing to register or to renew their registrations until June 1930, when a steep rise in the number of unemployed was noted, so that by October 1930 the number of unemployed had risen to a total of 2 100.<sup>41</sup> The deepening depression and the gold standard crisis appear to have exacerbated the unemployment situation in Durban and by December 1931, there were 2 561 registered unemployed in the town.<sup>42</sup> This number increased, with minor fluctuations, until it reached a peak of 3 472 registered unemployed at the end of October 1932.<sup>43</sup>

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37. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of Mabel Palmer, Durban, 7 April 1931, p. 6346.

38. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of Mabel Palmer, Durban, 7 April 1931, p. 6363.

39. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Robert Dunlop, Pietermaritzburg, 10 April 1931, p. 6814.

40. *Natal Mercury*, 10 December 1929. The records of the Department of Labour relating to unemployment have not yet been sorted and catalogued, and are thus not yet available to researchers. The press were, however, kept abreast of the situation through monthly briefings, which remain the only source of statistics for this period.

41. *Natal Mercury*, 25 October 1930.

42. *Natal Mercury*, 5 February 1932.

43. *Natal Mercury*, 1 November 1932.



Thereafter, the situation began to improve. The return of business confidence, after the Union's departure from the gold standard at the end of 1932, resulted in a gradual improvement and the unemployment rate declined markedly until March 1933, when there were only 1 035 registered unemployed.<sup>44</sup> The great drought gripping the province and the Union at this time did result in a further surge in unemployment until June 1933, when there were again 2 000 registered unemployed.<sup>45</sup> After June, however, the situation began to improve steadily, signalling the end of the depression. From December 1929 to October 1932, there was thus an increase of 479 per cent in the rate of unemployed white males in Durban.

Some of the unemployed whites were able to find employment on relief works in the town, but these were always inadequate and the average number never exceeded the maximum of 1 024 employed in 1933.<sup>46</sup>

As far as the unemployment of white women was concerned, very little was done. The prevailing condescending attitude, that work for white married women was an indulgence rather than a necessity, hardened into resentment that such women were keeping male breadwinners out of the positions which they occupied. Little attention was paid to the plight of unemployed women who were single mothers with children to support, or to situations where women became breadwinners through force of circumstance. Women were accused of working for "pin-money" and of worsening the situation for men. Such sentiments were regularly voiced at meetings of the unemployed<sup>47</sup> and in the press.<sup>48</sup>

Registrations of female white unemployed were only initiated by the local office of the Department of Labour in July 1931 after considerable pressure had been applied

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44. *Natal Mercury*, 29 April 1933.

45. *Natal Mercury*, 20 June 1933.

46. *Mayor's Minute* 1933, p. xxiv.

47. *Natal Mercury*, 2 July 1931.

48. *Natal Mercury*, 12 June 1930.

for something to be done. It was then found that there were 500 women prepared to register, even though there was little likelihood of any employment being found for them. This number fluctuated downwards to 450 in August 1931,<sup>49</sup> and to 362 in September 1931,<sup>50</sup> before increasing to a peak of 696 in October 1932.<sup>51</sup> Thereafter, the situation improved steadily. Most unemployed white women were forced to subsist on charity or by finding someone to maintain them, for no relief works were ever contemplated for women. Women did find it easier to gain seasonal employment as the numbers of shop assistants always increased over busy periods, especially the Christmas season.<sup>52</sup> Opposition to the employment of white women drew criticism from Councillor Mrs Edith Benson,<sup>53</sup> and from others, who believed that efforts to exclude white women from employment were misdirected. An extract from a letter to the *Natal Mercury*, signed "Sympathiser", commenting on plans by some trade unions to displace white women illustrates this:

If the Unions concentrated their efforts and threatened demonstrations upon those firms and industrialists who employ large percentages of Coloured and Asian labour, they would achieve far more, and have the sympathy of the public with them.<sup>54</sup>

Such racist responses were also evident when the problem of unemployment among white juveniles was raised. The unemployed in this category registered with the local Juvenile Affairs Board, which performed similar functions to the Department of Labour. There was a generally held perception among whites in Natal that white youths could not obtain employment because Africans and Indians had been employed in their stead.<sup>55</sup> This was certainly the stance adopted by "Delville Wood" when he wrote:

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49. *Natal Mercury*, 31 July 1931.

50. *Natal Mercury*, 19 September 1931.

51. *Natal Mercury*, 14 October 1932.

52. *Natal Mercury*, 3 December 1932.

53. *Natal Mercury*, 2 July 1931.

54. *Natal Mercury*, 9 July 1931.

55. See for example, *Natal Mercury*, 18 October 1932; letter signed "White Man" in the *Natal Mercury* 22 March 1932 and letter from "Anxious Mother", *Natal Mercury*, 25 May 1931.

Indians from the age of 12 upwards are employed and given employment at the present time while white boys and girls are tramping around looking for work...Here, I say, is the solution, let all employ whites and the others must make way for them. I know quite a few of the same boys and girls lost their fathers in the late War. Would these men have gone so willingly and sacrificed their lives had they known how Durban would carry out its promise to look after their dependants?<sup>56</sup>

The juvenile unemployment situation in Natal was aggravated by the fact that Natal had the lowest school-leaving age in the Union. A child could leave school in Natal if he or she had passed standard six or attained the age of fifteen years. Many children left school as soon as they had passed standard six, even if they were only thirteen years of age, and were sent to work to supplement the income of their families.<sup>57</sup> Mr B M Narbeth, Principal of the local Technical College and Chairman of the Juvenile Affairs Board, indicated that the law made provision for children to be withdrawn from school at an even earlier age, if their family was "...in indigent circumstances and needed the wages earned by children".<sup>58</sup> This was, in fact, not unique to Natal and was a common response to the depression all over the world.<sup>59</sup> Such provisions gave indifferent or desperate parents the right to remove children before they had even acquired a reasonable proficiency in language and arithmetic, which greatly reduced their employability.<sup>60</sup> Not all juvenile unemployment could be blamed on lack of education, for some unemployed juveniles were said to lack enterprise, energy, persistence and keenness, and to have unprepossessing appearances.<sup>61</sup>

Durban also acted as a magnet to such unemployed juveniles from elsewhere, aggravating the situation in the town:

This influx has an important bearing on both adult and juvenile unemployment in Durban. The drift to the towns is a big

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56. *Natal Mercury*, 12 September 1930.

57. *Natal Mercury*, 10 April 1930.

58. *Natal Mercury*, 10 April 1930.

59. J Robinson, *Essays in the Theory of Employment*, MacMillan, London, 1937, p. 12.

60. *Natal Mercury*, 10 April 1930.

61. *Natal Mercury*, 27 February 1930.

question which affects the whole of South Africa and cannot be adequately discussed here. It is unfortunate that it should occur when it is more than unusually difficult to find work in Durban. These juveniles are frequently unadapted to town life and backward educationally, this constituting the most difficult part of our unemployment problem.<sup>62</sup>

Given the above it is not surprising that Durban, as the major urban centre of Natal, should have had the highest unemployment rate among white juveniles in the entire Union, as table 7.2 illustrates:

**Table 7.2**  
**Unemployment among white juveniles in select towns and cities as at 31 December 1931**

<b>Town/City</b>	<b>White Population</b>	<b>Number Juveniles Unemployed</b>	<b>Per 1 000</b>
Johannesburg	182 000	542	3,0
Cape Town	135 000	132	1,0
Durban	61 000	513	8,4
Pretoria	45 000	285	6,3
Port Elizabeth	32 000	90	2,8

**Source:** *Natal Mercury*, 9 March 1932.

This unsatisfactory situation in Durban had improved only marginally to 7,3 per thousand by October 1933, while the situation in the other major urban centres of Johannesburg and Cape Town had shown more marked improvement.<sup>63</sup>

The juvenile unemployment figures were swollen each year by school-leavers. It appears that few school-leavers sought employment in December, when term closed, but deferred their registrations to January and February the following year. In December 1929, there were 138 registered unemployed white juveniles,<sup>64</sup> rising to 386 in February 1930.<sup>65</sup> In December 1930 only 197 were registered,<sup>66</sup> while there

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62. *Natal Mercury*, 25 May 1931.

63. *Natal Mercury*, 18 October 1933.

64. *Natal Mercury*, 10 January 1933.

65. *Natal Mercury*, 27 April 1931.

66. *Natal Mercury*, 10 January 1933.

were 511 in February 1931.<sup>67</sup> In December of that year, 513 were registered,<sup>68</sup> but this figure rose to 750 in February 1932<sup>69</sup> and to 868 in March 1932,<sup>70</sup> which point represented the peak of juvenile unemployment in the town. Little can be found by way of statistics for the remainder of the depression, but in December 1932 there were 533 registered,<sup>71</sup> and 808 in July 1933.<sup>72</sup>

It is clear that juvenile white unemployment experienced a more precipitous rise than that of white adult males, being 629 per cent higher in March 1932 than it had been in December 1929. It is also clear that the return of business confidence and the upswing in the economy did not significantly improve the situation in 1933, and white juvenile unemployment remained a cause for great concern, as J R Kingston-Russell, the renowned editor of the *Natal Mercury*, pointed out:

Signs of commercial and industrial stability and prosperity are illusory if the economic scheme of our development arbitrarily decrees that after every school term an ever increasing number of eager youths are to be turned into the barren wilderness occupied by the workless. There can be no future for a community when the only lesson it can offer its European youngsters is the daily demonstration that they are less fitted to earn a decent livelihood than Indians and Natives.<sup>73</sup>

Most white South Africans appear to have supported the Hertzog government's "civilised labour" policy and to have believed that they had a right to employment. It mattered little to them that workers of other racial groups would have to face the unpleasant consequences of displacement. It is perhaps as a result of this type of reasoning, mirrored so clearly in the columns of the *Natal Mercury*, that scant attention was paid to the unemployment problems of other racial groups in Durban.

The first expressions of concern about unemployment among Indians in the town were only reported after an investigation by the Indian Agent-General, Sir Kurma

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67. *Natal Mercury*, 27 April 1931.

68. *Natal Mercury*, 10 January 1933.

69. *Natal Mercury*, 5 February 1932.

70. *Natal Mercury*, 18 March 1932.

71. *Natal Mercury*, 10 January 1933.

72. *Natal Mercury*, 7 August 1933.

Reddi, in August 1931. In response to Reddi's investigation, the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) began compiling a special register to ascertain the exact extent of unemployment among the Indian community. In publicising a meeting of the unemployed to initiate this exercise, *Indian Opinion* carried the following:

This step has been taken owing to the impression prevalent among the Europeans in general and responsible men among them in particular that there is no unemployment among Indians. The object of the meeting is to prove to them that the unemployment among Indians is as acute as it is among Europeans and that their condition is even more distressing in consequence of the fact that the unemployed among their ranks are not privileged to take advantage of the relief measures as are the European unemployed.<sup>74</sup>

Approximately a thousand Indians registered as unemployed in a matter of a few days.<sup>75</sup> Political rivalry among competing Indian organisations, however, had prevented some from registering. The leader of the Natal Indian Vigilance Association, Mr J L Roberts, accused the NIC of political opportunism:

The Natal Indian Congress does not represent the poorer classes who do not want equal rights, but merely fair play and segregation from the Natives.<sup>76</sup>

This internecine rivalry flared once more when the NIC organised a demonstration march of unemployed Indians in Mayville.<sup>77</sup> In a letter signed "Unemployed Indian", the writer alleged that the NIC was merely seeking to make political capital out of the plight of the unemployed and consequently the meeting of the previous day had been a failure because.

hardly 10 per cent of the whole assembly were unemployed Indians. The other 90 per cent were friends of the so-called Indian Congress, which has not even 5 per cent of sane Indian public opinion behind it...some three years ago the Indian

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73. *Natal Mercury*, 1 August 1933.

74. *Indian Opinion*, 18 September 1931.

75. *Natal Mercury*, 23 September 1931.

76. *Natal Mercury*, 21 September 1931.

77. *Natal Mercury*, 24 September 1931.

unemployment situation began to cause concern among responsible Indians in Durban, but during this long period, the Congress, well knowing the parlous position of many Durban Indians, did not even bother about an ordinary investigation...Today the rank and file of the Indian unemployed army number some 2 000, but with the exception of long-winded, meaningless resolutions and a solidarity meeting, nothing tangible has been accomplished to aid the starving Indians, who are being exploited by wealthy Indian landlords and unscrupulous Indian traders.<sup>78</sup>

The agitation about Indian unemployment led to the formation of an investigatory committee by the Joint Indo-European Council. This committee, headed by Mabel Palmer, found that Indian unemployment was not as serious as had been suspected. Another finding was that, while some retrenchments had resulted from the introduction of technology in the printing industry and at the Lion Match factory, unemployment was mainly of a cyclical nature. The seasonal unemployment usually found in the hotel trade did not, in fact, exist.<sup>79</sup> Indian employment in secondary industry in Durban did not decline markedly during the depression. Katzen shows that the Indian workforce actually increased by 352 between 1929 and 1930, to a total of 4 474. In 1933, this number had declined by only 9,7 per cent to 4 040.<sup>80</sup>

More severe unemployment must have been present in other areas of the economy, however, for it cannot be merely coincidental that large numbers of Indians chose to be repatriated to India. In terms of the Cape Town Agreement of 1927, those Indians wishing to return to India were to be given free passage and a £25 bonus.<sup>81</sup> The numbers of Indians making use of this scheme increased dramatically during the depression; in 1930 slightly more than 1 000 were repatriated but in 1932, 3 000 emigrated.<sup>82</sup>

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78. *Natal Mercury*, 25 September 1931. There appears to be some substance to this latter charge for an Indian employer, one Morarjee Bhikhabhai Naik, was fined the sum of £100 for grossly exploiting underage Indian labour, making them work for more than 48 hours per week for only 15s. See *Natal Mercury*, 3 April 1931.

79. *Natal Mercury*, 9 December 1931.

80. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 163.

81. *Natal Mercury*, 29 October 1931.

82. Burrows, *Indian Life and Labour*, p. 3.

As Smith pointed out, the majority of these Indians were previously domiciled in Natal:

Migration losses have been heavier in Natal than in the other provinces, a fact which is explained partly by the higher intensity of intra-Indian competition for limited employment opportunities in the most heavily Indian populated Province than elsewhere. In consequence of this, depression has been more likely to suggest repatriation to the Indian in Natal than in other less Indianised areas, which, as it happens, are even further away from the mother country.<sup>83</sup>

Naturally, not all those who chose to leave were unemployed, but there was a general perception, shared by the Director of Indian Immigration, Mr H Robinson, that many of the Indians of Natal had indeed chosen to return to India in the face of continuing unemployment.<sup>84</sup> Thus the unemployment situation was alleviated through the simple process of removing the unemployed.<sup>85</sup> Freund goes much further by suggesting that Indians were actually encouraged to leave. He wrote of the situation in Durban:

...establishment views fantasised a city without Indians and hoped many would be induced to emigrate to India. The Indians were a kind of 'surplus' and the 'Indian question' often was seen as one of unemployment and redundant population. With the onset of the Depression and under the inspiration of the Pact government, authority saw the answer in firing Indians to give jobs to whites.<sup>86</sup>

The government's "civilised labour" policy, and the high incidence of anti-Asiatic feeling prevalent in Natal, might also have contributed to the decision to leave the Union. Such racist feeling in Natal reached fever pitch during the depression years, as whites saw the displacement of Indians as one way of guaranteeing themselves employment. A grass-roots movement called the Anti-Asiatic Encroachment League was formed in Durban by one S M Oellermann. The League drew up a

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83. Smith, "Labour Resources", pp. 52 - 53.

84. *Ibid.* *Indian Opinion* had a more sanguine view: "Whether any steps will be taken or not [to relieve unemployment] will remain to be seen. We can only appeal to their sense of justice. Their present mentality, however, of finding ways and means to drive Indians out of the country makes one only a little pessimistic." *Indian Opinion*, 18 September 1931.

85. Robinson, *Unemployment*, p. 75.

86. Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, p. 49.



petition beseeching the government to put an end to Indian competition for employment, and also in trade and commerce. Such were the hostile feelings towards Indians that 26 000 whites, (or approximately 42,6 per cent of the white population of Durban) allegedly appended their signatures to the petition.<sup>87</sup>

The Palmer committee also found that there was a high rate of juvenile unemployment among the Indian population of Durban. The committee recommended that education of Indians be made compulsory and that the local Juvenile Affairs Board also take jurisdiction over Indian youths. These measures, it was thought, would go some way towards relieving the problem.<sup>88</sup>

Despite agitation about the plight of unemployed Indians, it took until late 1932 for the Town Council to decide to implement relief works for Indians. It was initially envisaged that these would accommodate 600 Indian males<sup>89</sup> but, in the event, only some 300 were so employed in June 1933,<sup>90</sup> augmented by a further 40 in July 1933.<sup>91</sup> Residential and marriage qualifications were also imposed. Even in the process of assisting unemployed Indians through relief works, the authorities were led by prevailing racist attitudes to the decision that they should be paid less than their white counterparts. Indians on relief works received only 3s per man per day, as compared to 8s for whites.<sup>92</sup> By 1934 only 270 Indians were still employed on relief works,<sup>93</sup> indicating that although the unemployment problem had eased somewhat, it was still not possible for all these men to return to normal employment.

Although unemployment among Indians does not appear to have reached crisis proportions during the depression, it must be remembered that most Indians were lowly paid workers and that any period of unemployment would have quickly

87. *Natal Mercury*, 16 January 1932.

88. *Natal Mercury*, 9 December 1931.

89. *Natal Mercury*, 16 December 1932.

90. *Mayor's Minute* 1933, p. xxiv.

91. *Natal Mercury*, 14 July 1933.

92. *Mayor's Minute*, 1934, p. xxv.

93. *Ibid.*

consumed any reserves that may have been scraped together. Conversely, the extended family system prevalent in this community meant that the burden of unemployment was shared as resources were pooled amongst family members.<sup>94</sup> It was written in *Indian Opinion* that:

...the wants of Indians are meagre and their capacity to suffer is great. Hence they put up with the circumstances in which they find themselves without making a song of it or parading the streets.<sup>95</sup>

The small "coloured" community of Durban did suffer some measure of unemployment during the depression, despite the fact that employment of "coloureds" in secondary industry actually rose during the depression years.<sup>96</sup> It appears that unemployed "coloureds" from elsewhere in the country made their way to Durban, thus aggravating the unemployment situation for others, especially in the building trade. No system of registration for "coloureds" was ever instituted, but the local Town Council did make relief works available to assist the unemployed of the "coloured" community, some 80 men being so employed in 1932.<sup>97</sup> This number remained fairly stable, showing only a slight diminution to 72 men in 1933/34.<sup>98</sup>

As indicated earlier, any attempt to deal with unemployment among Africans in Durban is fraught with difficulties, as there is a distinct lack of statistics. There was no registration of African unemployed, nor were any relief works ever instituted for them in the urban areas of Natal. However, Durban was a proclaimed area under the Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923,<sup>99</sup> which meant that legally, all Africans entering the town had to register their presence with the local Native Administration Department (NAD) and apply for permission to remain in the area.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, contracts of employment between Africans and their employers in the

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94. *Natal Mercury*, 9 December 1931.

95. *Indian Opinion*, 18 September 1931.

96. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 163.

97. Mayor's Minute 1932, p. xx.

98. Mayor's Minute 1934, p. xxv.

99. Proclamation No. 10, 1928.

100. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of T J Chester (Acting Manager of the Native Administration Department), Durban, 7 April 1931, p. 6475.

borough had to be registered with the NAD and renewed monthly, thus providing some indication of the numbers actually in employment. Fees were charged for this service; 1s for an initial registration and 6d for every monthly renewal.<sup>101</sup> From these figures it was possible to compile the following table:

**Table 7.3**  
**Number of Registered African Male Employees**  
**in Durban, 1928-1933**

Year	Initial	Reregistration	Renewals	Total
1928	14 401	44 866	336 639	33 992
1929	14 237	45 784	338 267	33 190
1930	14 160	41 295	314 916	30 864
1931	10 355	34 829	299 788	28 747
1932*	-	-	-	-
1933	11 139	32 072	295 502	28 266

\*No figures were ever provided for 1932.

**Sources:** CAD, NEC, K26, F14, Memorandum of written evidence submitted by the Durban Town Council and Mayor's Minutes for relevant years.

This complex table requires explanation. An initial registration was the registration of an African working in the town for the first time; a reregistration applied to those Africans who changed jobs; renewals were the monthly renewals of Africans still employed by the same employer. The total is arrived at by adding initial registrations and renewals and dividing by twelve to produce a monthly average. The decline in this figure over the period is significant.

To complicate matters, the figures for 1933 included the newly incorporated areas, which were added to the borough in 1932. If one subtracts the figures emanating from these areas, the net decline is more obvious, for there were 4 177 initial registrations, 4 850 reregistrations and 38 768 renewals of registration, giving a net monthly average for 1933 of only 24 243 registered African workers in Durban.<sup>102</sup> This procedure was followed by Hemson,<sup>103</sup> but this is based on flawed reasoning,

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101. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 327.

102. Mayor's Minute 1933, p. 38.

103. Hemson, "Dockworkers", p. 265.

for although it is obvious that not all Africans living in these areas worked in Durban prior to their incorporation, Smith estimated that approximately 75 per cent of them did<sup>104</sup> and they therefore would have been obliged to have been registered as employees in Durban prior to 1933. In any case, the decline in the number of registered employees is obvious, indicating the effects of the depression and the "civilised labour" policy.

These twin factors had a great impact on African employment in secondary industry in greater Durban during the depression, for the African component of the workforce declined by 37 per cent, from 8 559 in 1930 to only 5 415 in 1933.<sup>105</sup> Wage Board determinations were also blamed for unemployment among Africans.<sup>106</sup> It appears that Indian workers gained employment at the expense of African workers, as the numbers of Indians in employment in secondary industry, for example, actually increased during the depression years.<sup>107</sup>

As demonstrated in an earlier chapter, conditions in the reserves deteriorated at an accelerating pace during the depression years, forcing more and more of the inhabitants to move to the towns to seek employment in order to survive.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, conditions on white farms in Natal were also deteriorating and, as farmers tried to expand production, labour tenants and other workers were forced off the farms. Exploitative conditions had moreover prompted many of the younger Africans to desert to the towns.<sup>109</sup> Smith argued that there was a marked increase in the number of Africans over the age of 45 years who came to Durban looking for work for the first time during the depression years, an indication of the extent of rural poverty at this time.

It would appear that there is a tendency at work widening the

104. Smith, "Labour Resources", pp. 93 - 97.

105. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 163 and Van Der Horst, *Native Labour*, p. 263.

106. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of A Z Mazingi, Durban, 2 April 1931, pp. 6338 - 6339.

107. Katzen, *Industry*, p. 163.

108. See Chapter Six.

109. See Chapter Five.

age span during which Natives come for the first time to work in Durban. This may be due to the growing pressure which rural poverty is placing on Natal Natives.<sup>110</sup>

Most jobs commenced by Africans during the depression period showed an abnormally high average duration, indicating that the need for remuneration was greater.<sup>111</sup> Smith wrote:

His sojourn in Durban is dictated to a greater extent by the rural situation. If there is a need for a larger amount of cash, he is compelled to work for a longer period.<sup>112</sup>

This does not apply across the board, however, for in some areas of the economy, Africans were actually demanding shorter contracts. This was so especially in the building trades and was to the benefit of both employer and employee. The employer could dismiss unneeded employees more quickly once projects had been completed, and Africans could give shorter notice periods if a more lucrative form of employment could be found elsewhere in the economy.<sup>113</sup> The building trade appears to have been the exception, for generally the average period of service was expanded as African wages fell during the depression years. This was a consequence of both the increased availability of labour and the need of employers to cut costs during the depression. In secondary industry in Durban, for example, African wages fell from an average of £43 per annum to £41 per annum between 1929 and 1933, in contrast to the rest of the Union, where wages actually rose from £45 to £46 in the same years.<sup>114</sup> Some 60 per cent of all jobs were in the relatively low-wage bracket of less than 14s 5d per week, while 34 per cent were in the bracket between 14s 6d and 19s 5d per week.<sup>115</sup>

Surprisingly, the numbers of Africans applying for permits, either to visit relatives in

110. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 381.

111. *Ibid.*, p. 413.

112. *Ibid.*, p. 349.

113. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of E B Scott (Town Treasurer of Durban), Durban, 7 April 1931, pp. 6485 - 6487.

114. Van der Horst, *Native Labour*, p. 263.

115. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 410.

the town or to seek employment, do not reflect the expected increase in migrants, as table 7.4 illustrates:

**Table 7.4**  
**Six-day Permits issued in Durban, 1927/28 - 1932/33**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>1927/28</b>	<b>1928/29</b>	<b>1929/30</b>	<b>1930/31</b>	<b>1931/32*</b>	<b>1932/33</b>
Male Visitors	5 501	4 478	1 795	2 322	-	1 850
Female Visitors	7 447	2 974	528	230	-	315
Natives Seeking Work	44 667	42 299	25 976	19 528	-	23 678
Total	59 615	49 751	28 299	22 090	-	26 043

\* No figures available for 1931/32.

**Source:** CAD, NEC, K26, F14, Memorandum of written evidence submitted by the Durban Town Council and Mayor's Minutes for relevant years.

The decline in the total number of permits issued from 1927/28 to 1930/31 is marked, being in the order of 63 per cent. The danger of relying on statistical evidence alone is again illustrated here, for judging solely on these statistics, one might justifiably form the opinion that there were in fact fewer Africans in the town who might be classed as unemployed. The real picture emerges when one studies the evidence presented to the NEC: both T J Chester (the Acting Manager of the municipal NAD) and Selby Ngcobo claimed that there was an avoidance of registrations. Chester said:

I think that possibly conditions have been such that these Natives have not reported to us as regularly as they should have done, nor have we rigidly enforced our visiting permits. As you know, we have trouble at times, for the last 3 or 4 years, and, I think, quite a lot of them did not worry to observe these regulations. Although the position appears to be going back to normal now, there has been a time when there has been a certain amount of contempt for these things.<sup>116</sup>

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116. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of T J Chester, Durban, 7 April 1931, p. 6475.

In a written submission to the NEC, Ngcobo wrote:

There are a good many Natives in Durban looking for jobs who are in Durban without the knowledge of the Native Affairs Department. These men do not take any special pass; at any rate not as frequently as they should and do not sleep at the Men's Singles Quarters.<sup>117</sup>

Whether the avoidance of registration, or the failure to obtain six-day permits, can entirely explain the decline in the figures is impossible to say. It is not unreasonable to suggest, however, that there were considerable numbers of African job-seekers in the greater Durban region. Ngcobo stated that African job-seekers were assisted by their fellows:

They stay with their relatives and friends in town, eating the food they eat and using their friend's room, and maybe, his spare blankets...The Natives regard taking in an unemployed as a humanitarian act...<sup>118</sup>

Apart from those Africans who actually resided in the town, there were a large number who took up residence on the outskirts of the town, just beyond the jurisdiction of the corporation, where rentals were lower and the local state mechanisms less repressive.<sup>119</sup> This was one of the major reasons for the incorporation of the additional areas into the borough in 1932. The local state was aware of a "large floating population" of between 60 000 and 70 000 people in Durban during the later 1920s, and claimed that this number had been reduced to some 20 000 during the depression years.<sup>120</sup> Given their inability to control the influx and efflux of Africans to and from Durban, and the lack of accurate statistical knowledge concerning the African population of the town, this claim appears to have had little foundation.<sup>121</sup>

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117. CAD, NEC, K26, F14, Written submission of S Ngcobo, p. 2.

118. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

119. CAD, NEC, K26, F7, Evidence of Dr G A P Ross (Assistant Medical Officer of Health), Durban, 1 April 1931, pp. 6077 - 6080.

120. Mayor's Minute 1932, p. 6.

121. Following the Beer Hall riots of 1929, the number of Africans in Durban became an important issue of concern to the Town Council and indeed to the government. This will be dealt with in Chapter Ten. It may be posited that the dissemination of information suggesting a diminution

The type of jobs sought by Africans during the depression period also underwent a marked change, with domestic service becoming increasingly popular, as workers usually received not only their wages, but also food and accommodation.<sup>122</sup> Figures relating to the proportion of Africans working in various sectors in Durban were presented to the NEC and are given below:

25% of Natives are males in Domestic Service  
 3% of Natives were females in household employ  
 1% of the females are engaged in other services  
 70% of the Native males take up Industrial and commercial service  
 1% of the Native Males follow callings where they are not under service to an employer.<sup>123</sup>

Seen in totality, it is obvious that unemployment among Africans in Durban during the depression not only existed, but was aggravated by the "civilised labour" policy. It is, however, almost impossible to quantify this. The prevailing blinkered view appears to have been that Africans arriving in Durban to seek work would have perceived the situation as hopeless and would have joined their fellows who had been retrenched in returning to the rural areas from whence they had come. Local officials had very little idea of conditions in the reserves, or they would have realised that this was a pipe-dream. Many Africans appear to have flouted regulations and to have remained either in or around the town, while looking for work or finding other avenues to eke out a living.

In Pietermaritzburg, the second major urban centre of Natal and the provincial capital, the unemployment situation was less serious in that the industrial base of the city was far smaller. However, the proximity of the city to farming and rural industries did mean that the city experienced an influx of unemployed from elsewhere, as evidence presented to the NEC shows:

I know there is a proportion [of whites] coming in from the country because the country cannot support a certain number

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might well have been a sop to the more concerned white citizens of the town.

122. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 350.

123. CAD, NEC, K26, F14, Written submission of the Durban Town Council, p. 13.



and that class, of course, is a very poor one, they are very poor people who have been brought up on farms. That class is a very poor class, because of their want of education in the early stages.<sup>124</sup>

Pietermaritzburg had long experienced problems relating to white unemployment. The *Corporation Year Book* for 1922 contained the statement that "...for a considerable time the matter of the city unemployed has been one of great anxiety".<sup>125</sup> Some 122 white men were registered as unemployed at this time.<sup>126</sup> Throughout the 1920s, this number fluctuated, but remained a cause of concern, necessitating the continuation of relief works for the entire period.<sup>127</sup> Owen has suggested that many of the whites thus assisted may very well have been "unemployed sojourners who had come up against hard times in other parts of the Union" as only a three-month residential qualification for assistance existed during this period.<sup>128</sup> This is borne out by the following description of the unemployed by officials of the Council:

Most of the men do not know what a steady day's work means. They seem to be content to remain as they are without making any effort to improve, and will therefore remain as long as they are permitted to.<sup>129</sup>

At the onset of the depression in the city in 1930, although there was still a degree of unemployment, the City Council was beginning to become concerned about creating conditions through the provision of relief works that would actually attract the unemployed and "all sorts of undesirables" from elsewhere to Pietermaritzburg.<sup>130</sup>

There was a woeful lack of statistics concerning even white unemployment in the early years of the depression, a fact which was lamented by the unemployed themselves:

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124. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Canon Cyril Robinson, Pietermaritzburg, 10 April 1931, p. 6729.

125. City of Pietermaritzburg, *Corporation Year Book*, 1922, p. 23.

126. *Ibid.*

127. Owen, "White Unemployment", pp. 16 - 28.

128. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

129. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Works Committee, 24 February 1925.

130. *Natal Witness*, 15 January 1930.

I noticed an article...stating that unemployment was not so bad in Maritzburg as in other centres. It would enlighten some people if a consensus [*sic*] were taken of the out-of-works in the city. One cannot depend on a true estimate by taking into consideration how many are unemployed on the relief works or by the Benevolent Society's books. I am writing this as several unemployed have asked me what I thought of this article.<sup>131</sup>

The discontent of the unemployed led to the formation of the "Grouzers", a group dedicated to the welfare of the poor and unemployed of the city.<sup>132</sup> The membership of the Grouzers grew rapidly, and they were soon providing food and clothing and looking for jobs for several hundred people.<sup>133</sup> Yet there were some who believed that the "Grouzers" were greatly exaggerating the unemployment position for their own purposes.<sup>134</sup> Indeed this appears to have been the case, for although the membership of the Grouzers numbered some 1 000 in December,<sup>135</sup> only 143 men turned up at a meeting of the unemployed of the city in January 1931.<sup>136</sup> The Grouzers claimed at this meeting that 491 men had registered their names with the organisation as unemployed, but admitted that only 73 per cent were residents of Pietermaritzburg and 94 per cent were whites.<sup>137</sup> There was, therefore, a total of 460 unemployed white men in the city.<sup>138</sup> These claims had repercussions in that Mr S D Roberts, one of the regional representatives of the Department of Labour, came post-haste from Durban to investigate the unemployment situation in the city and met with the Grouzers.

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131. Letter to the Editor, *Natal Witness*, 6 November 1930.

132. Owen, "White Unemployment", p. 36. The Grouzers will be discussed more fully in Chapter Nine.

133. *Ibid.*, pp. 38 - 41.

134. See various articles in the *Natal Witness*, 6 January 1931.

135. *Natal Witness*, 27 December 1930.

136. *Natal Witness*, 14 January 1931.

137. It is indeed interesting to note that the Grouzers were able to attract the unemployed of other races to sign up, but were avowedly racist in advocating the implementation of the "civilised labour" policy.

138. *Natal Witness*, 15 January 1931.

Interviewed in the *Natal Witness* the following day, Roberts said:

I have been deeply shocked at the state of the unemployment in Maritzburg as it has been revealed to me by the representatives of the city's unemployed [the Groucers]...The statement that there are 400 unemployed in the city has impressed me profoundly...as they [the figures] are not in any way comparable with the numbers registered on our books. I am at a complete loss to understand the position in the city.<sup>139</sup>

One of the reasons that Roberts found this so shocking was the fact that, although there was a quota set aside for the unemployed of Pietermaritzburg on various relief works in the province, the department had been forced to fill this with unemployed from other centres;<sup>140</sup> the department was therefore under the impression that unemployment in Pietermaritzburg was less severe than elsewhere. The Groucers had explained that the unemployed men were reluctant to leave their families for extended periods, and Roberts promised that after proper investigation, the department would seek to provide increased relief in and around the city.<sup>141</sup>

Sensing that the time was right to pressurise the authorities into doing something about the unemployment among whites in Pietermaritzburg, various protest meetings were called by the unemployed. Some 350 attended a meeting at which a speaker, Mr L. H. Greene, called upon the unemployed of the Union to organise themselves politically to give weight to their demands for an improvement in their conditions. This was the right of the people who had paid taxes; the government had to be "forced" to do something for the unemployed.<sup>142</sup>

In disseminating information concerning the alleged high rate of unemployment in the city, the Groucers inadvertently brought about the ruination of their reputation and ultimately, the demise of their movement. When pressed for details by Roberts, the Groucers claimed that there were 169 genuine unemployed in the city, but Roberts could only find 39, many of whom had only recently become unemployed,

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139. *Natal Witness*, 22 January 1931.

140. See NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of Relief Works Sub-Committee, 12 February 1930.

141. *Natal Witness*, 22 January 1931.

142. *Natal Witness*, 22 January 1931.

or had refused relief work for a variety of reasons. When he made twelve jobs available to the Grouseers, only six men applied and then refused the employment offered.<sup>143</sup> The leadership refused to make available their register of the unemployed of the city. The movement dissolved after details of financial mismanagement (the charges against them amounted to misappropriation of funds) became known, and when the leaders of the movement were convicted of assault.<sup>144</sup>

The unemployment situation in the city among whites continued to worsen. Eighty-seven were registered with the Department of Labour in February 1931, of whom only eight could be placed in employment.<sup>145</sup> The City Council had only twenty-eight men employed on relief works at this time and had imposed a three-year residence qualification on those seeking employment.<sup>146</sup> Although the Grouseers were no more, the agitation they had caused led to the intervention of the City Council which, through the agency of Councillor Major Way, began to take the lead in co-ordinating relief efforts. These began with a plan to manage the crisis being published in the press.<sup>147</sup> A register of the unemployed was initiated and 195 men registered as unemployed, while it was also noted that 207 families were not receiving adequate feeding.<sup>148</sup> The Pietermaritzburg corporation decided to retrench 20 per cent of their black labourers and made those positions available to the white unemployed as temporary relief works.<sup>149</sup>

As the situation continued to deteriorate, the unemployed and their champions became more vociferous and demanded the abolition of relief works which were regarded as an unsatisfactory solution to the problem. They called for the government to "...unlock the land; the unemployed do not want relief or charity".<sup>150</sup>

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143. *Natal Witness*, 28 January 1931.

144. Owen, "White Unemployment", pp. 48 - 50.

145. *Natal Witness*, 2 February 1931.

146. *Natal Witness*, 6 February 1931.

147. *Natal Witness*, 9 February 1931.

148. *Natal Witness*, 17 February 1931.

149. *Natal Witness*, 25 September 1931.

150. *Natal Witness*, 24 February 1931. It seems strange that at a time when most of Natal's farmers were suffering considerable hardships the unemployed wanted to join the ranks of the

More interestingly, they also called upon the council to dismiss all pensioners and women whose husbands received good salaries. Some of their oratory displayed a distinctly revolutionary bent and this will be referred to in more detail below.

There were constant suggestions that the situation in Pietermaritzburg was being exaggerated as, of the 132 registered unemployed in the city in February 1932, a large proportion were "passers-through", "won't-works" and black-listed men who had fallen foul of the authorities for unreliability.<sup>151</sup> Official statistics showed that Pietermaritzburg's unemployment situation was on a par with that in Cape Town and Bloemfontein, while the situation in Durban was the worst in the Union at this time.<sup>152</sup> The Benevolent Society did note with some degree of satisfaction that the influx of poor whites into the city had almost ceased and that they were assisting "respectable citizens of many years residence, who never imagined that they would be obliged to ask for charity".<sup>153</sup> By May the number of unemployed had risen to 185, of whom 110 were residents of more than 7 years' standing.<sup>154</sup> By July 1932, the unemployed numbered 280<sup>155</sup> but by November of that year, some 506 were unemployed; 300 were on the waiting list for relief work employment.<sup>156</sup> Thereafter the situation improved slowly and the unemployed were gradually re-absorbed into employment, but there were still some 153 men on relief works as late as June 1934.<sup>157</sup>

Very little evidence relating to the unemployment of white females can be found for Pietermaritzburg and environs. There appears to have been a perception in some quarters that particular families were monopolising employment to the detriment of unemployed women:

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farmers.

151. *Natal Witness*, 3 February 1932.

152. *Natal Witness*, 4 February 1932.

153. *Natal Witness*, 7 May 1932.

154. *Natal Witness*, 17 May 1932.

155. *Natal Witness*, 1 July 1932.

156. *Natal Witness*, 2 November 1932.

157. City of Pietermaritzburg, City Engineer's Report, *Corporation Year Book*, 1934.

It was also believed that there were men in the city who received substantial salaries, yet their wives and daughters worked, 'thus enabling the family to live in luxury, while other women were unable to find work.'<sup>158</sup>

The plight of unemployed juveniles is equally obscure; in September 1930 the *Natal Witness* reported that although 117 youths were unemployed, only 6 had been able to find employment.<sup>159</sup> Even those with matriculation certificates found it difficult to find employment:

The foundation of the belief that the matriculation certificate is the key to the 'golden gate' of higher grade employment has been rudely shaken throughout Natal within the past few days...In the majority of cases...the search has been in vain.<sup>160</sup>

As in Durban, the juvenile unemployment situation in Pietermaritzburg was aggravated by the annual exodus of school-leavers; in September 1932 it was reported that an estimated 200 school children would be looking for employment at the end of the year.<sup>161</sup> Measures were adopted to create employment in the Council service for juveniles.<sup>162</sup>

Similarly, there is very little evidence to show how the employment of blacks in Pietermaritzburg was affected by the depression. According to the evidence presented to the NEC, there were some 12 000 Africans resident in and around the city,<sup>163</sup> of whom some 4 300 were women.<sup>164</sup> The actual number in the city was put at approximately 8 000 males.<sup>165</sup> The implementation of the "civilised labour" policy had resulted in unemployment among Indians and Africans in the town, which had caused some concern:

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158. Owen, "White Unemployment", p. 29, quoting from the *Natal Witness*, 3 September 1930.

159. *Natal Witness*, 3 September 1930.

160. *Natal Witness*, 28 January 1931.

161. *Natal Witness*, 13 September 1932.

162. See below, Chapter Eight.

163. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Dr William Wood (Medical Officer of Health), Pietermaritzburg, 10 April 1931, p. 6761.

164. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Mr Robert Dunlop (Chairman of the Joint Council and Native Welfare Society), Pietermaritzburg, 10 April 1931, p. 6814.

Commissioner: ...You say that the Poor Whites are taxed much less than the Natives and the Poor Whites receive enormous sums by way of government aid?

Mr Dunlop: They do.

Commissioner: What sort of figures had you in mind there?

Mr Dunlop: Quite a number of them. They do not pay any special taxation for the education of their children. Jobs are found for them. They are paid enormous sums by way of railway service, for which we know they do not give an adequate *quid pro quo*.

Commissioner: You mean, large sums are given to employ them, although Natives would be cheaper?

Mr Dunlop: Yes. We had 400 of them brought into this Community and, because of their influx, 400 Natives and Indians who were long employed on the Railway Department [sic] were put out of employment.<sup>166</sup>

This was also the perception of Africans:

Another matter to which I want to refer is the matter of the employment of Natives. Today there are many Natives walking about the countryside who are quite unable to find work, although they wish to work. Some are being deprived of their work by their white employers and some by the government. That makes us wonder where these unemployed Natives will get money to pay their taxes and other Government dues. Moreover, if a Native, who cannot find employment, is found wandering about the countryside like that, he runs the risk of being arrested for roaming around the countryside and being up to no good.<sup>167</sup>

There was, indeed, some distress among Africans, for several deputations of African *togt* workers were received by Council officials, with the result that free meals were given to a number of unemployed Africans.<sup>168</sup> In April 1932, about ten Africans were found employment after a deputation of twenty unemployed had approached the council asking for work.<sup>169</sup> The council was prepared to accept that it had a

165. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Native Administration Committee, 2 March 1931.

166. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Robert Dunlop, Pietermaritzburg, 10 April 1931. pp. 6820 - 6821.

167. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Chief Stephen Mini, Pietermaritzburg, 10 April 1931, p. 6778.

168. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Native Affairs Committee, 8 October 1931.

169. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Native Affairs Committee, 4 April 1932.

measure of responsibility towards those Africans who resided permanently in the "Native Village", and who had previously been in employment in the city, although this did not extend to those Africans who had come to the city looking for work. The setting up of relief works for the former was contemplated, but nothing was done as no subsidy from the government was forthcoming.<sup>170</sup>

There were, however, indications that unemployment among the city's Indian and "coloured" communities was rife, as the City Council authorised street collections and instituted relief works for these unemployed, some 41 "coloured" men being employed by October 1932.<sup>171</sup> There were still 100 "coloured" men employed on the relief works in February 1933,<sup>172</sup> while arrangements were made for 50 Indians to be employed on relief works in April 1933.<sup>173</sup> Very little other evidence pertaining to the unemployment of Indians and "coloureds" in Pietermaritzburg could be found. There were some 40 men employed on council relief works in 1933,<sup>174</sup> a number which had declined only marginally, to 37, by 1934.<sup>175</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the City Council was opposed to the "civilised labour" policy and resisted suggestions that it displace black workers in its permanent employ for whites, even though the extra costs to the council would have been subsidised. The Department of Labour continually threatened to withdraw the existing subsidy for white relief workers,<sup>176</sup> but it appears that the council refused to compromise as no evidence can be found that relief workers were ever employed in a permanent capacity.

In the smaller towns of Natal, the unemployment situation varied with the fortunes of the chief economic activities of the surrounding region. Generally, however, the

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170. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Native Affairs Committee, 27 November 1933.

171. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the City Council-in-Committee, 25 October 1932.

172. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the City Council-in-Committee, 9 February 1933.

173. NAD, 3/PMB, Report of the Finance Committee to the City Council, included in City Council Minutes, 11 April 1933.

174. City of Pietermaritzburg, City Engineer's Report, *Corporation Year Book*, 1933.

175. City of Pietermaritzburg, City Engineer's Report, *Corporation Year Book*, 1934.

176. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Relief Works Sub-Committee, 27 May 1929 and NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the City Council, 5 November 1931.



numbers of the unemployed were small and as there was often little hope of employment, or even assistance from local authorities, the unemployed tended to drift to the major urban centres of the province, particularly Durban. Very little evidence can be found regarding the unemployment situation of any group other than white adult males. Small-town newspapers, where they existed, carried little information regarding the number of even white unemployed. Recourse was made to the minutes of the town councils, but unfortunately evidence relating to unemployment could often only be detected through figures relating to employment on local relief works, and the relief of distress.

In Colenso, the Town Council made a stout effort to apply the "civilised labour" policy by dispensing with the services of an African Town Office messenger, and replacing him with a "suitable European youth".<sup>177</sup> The Town Council also authorised door-to-door collections for certain poor white families in the town, but no relief works were ever begun, nor was any attention given to the distressed of other communities.

In the coal-mining district, the town of Dundee was more severely affected and consequently greeted the proposed derating of government buildings with some apprehension:

...this meeting of the Committee of the Property Owner's Association takes a serious view of the present economic position and views with apprehension the possibility of the proposed derating of government buildings, also the gradual increase of municipal expenditure, and the possibility of an increase in the rates of the Borough, which we consider the majority of Ratepayers are not in a position at the present time to meet. The majority of Property Owners are not getting a fair return on the money outlying [*sic*] on their property and an increase of rent is beyond the power of the tenants [*sic*] to contribute, while many of those living in their own houses are finding a difficulty in making ends meet. The business people in town are also finding great difficulty in getting their businesses to come out on the right side. While not wishing to criticise the policy of the Council in detail, we would respectfully urge upon them a general policy, during the present depressed time, of rigid economy, in order that there will be no increase of the present rates.<sup>178</sup>

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177. NAD, 3/COL, Minutes of the Town Council, 30 August 1932.

Some distress was definitely present in the district, for several people were arrested for vagrancy, a proceeding which had never before been necessary in the borough.<sup>179</sup> The Council also applied the government's "civilised labour" policy by giving preference to a European over a "coloured" applicant for a lorry-driver's position. In debate, the wage attached to this position (£9 per month) was considered to be possibly too low to be offered to a white man, but

as the applicant was desirous of getting the job it was felt that it would not be right to turn down a European for a Coloured man, particularly at the present time.<sup>180</sup>

The Council also received a petition from fifty-five residents of the town calling for the replacement of an "old and feeble Native" at the town cemetery by a white man "who can only receive a living salary".<sup>181</sup> The council never began any relief works and did not engage any unemployed whites as additional workers in its service, preferring to increase its contribution to the local Benevolent Society to provide for the assistance of such people.<sup>182</sup> In the Zululand town of Eshowe, the local Town Board resisted attempts by the unemployed to create billets for themselves in municipal employ,<sup>183</sup> and even resisted attempts to replace Indian employees with whites.<sup>184</sup>

In the neighbouring town of Utrecht, the council found that it was not in a position to assist unemployed farmers in the area,<sup>185</sup> nor could it afford to assist the

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178. NAD, 3/DUN, Letter in Minutes of the Town Council, 24 April 1930.

179. NAD, 3/DUN, Minutes of Town Council, 24 July 1930. The race group of the offenders was not specified.

180. NAD, 3/DUN, Minutes of the Town Council, 23 September 1930.

181. NAD, 3/DUN, Minutes of the Town Council, 28 September 1933.

182. This was done in the case of one C van Tonder, who had applied for a job "to enable him to support his family, he having been out of employment for some time." An extra £2 per month was contributed to the Benevolent Society to assist him. NAD, 3/DUN, Minutes of the Town Council, 26 February 1931.

183. NAD, 3/ESH, Minutes of the Local Town Board, 2 March 1931 and 16 March 1931.

184. NAD, 3/ESH, Minutes of the Local Town Board, 23 July 1931.

185. NAD, 3/UTR, Minutes of the Town Council, 17 September 1931.

unemployed resident in the town itself.<sup>186</sup> It did manage to find employment for one European youth, who replaced an African previously employed as a messenger and caretaker at the town hall, after which the council resolved to write to the Divisional Inspector for Labour to inform him that

the Council has filled all available positions with European labour and is unable to absorb any more unemployed [sic].<sup>187</sup>

Also in northern Natal, the town of Vryheid had similar problems relating to distress among the surrounding farming community, for as early as March 1929, the local Child Welfare Society was asking for permission to hold a street collection. In supporting the application, Councillor Mr Botha said

that there was a large number of poor people in the Borough and the number was increasing regularly owing to these people flocking to the town, and the demand increasing proportionally, so that the Association found it impossible to meet the appeals.<sup>188</sup>

The council was mindful of the unemployment among whites in the town, and five whites were engaged to man the sentinel wagon, a job previously done by Africans. This was accepted as a form of relief works as the council obtained a subsidy from the Department of Labour.<sup>189</sup> The severity of the situation in the town can be gauged from the fact that when the position of Storekeeper was advertised by the council, at a salary of £25 per month, no fewer than 165 applications were received.<sup>190</sup>

In Estcourt, the local town council had its proceedings disrupted by unemployed whites who attempted to force the council to take action on the unemployment situation in the town.<sup>191</sup> Despite this, nothing was done until July 1932, when

186. See NAD, 3/UTR, Minutes of Town Council 12 November 1931 and 23 June 1932. In the former case, one J Moolman was prepared to work as a caretaker for £2 per month, while in the latter case one J Colesky begged for employment "as he is practically destitute".

187. NAD, 3/UTR, Minutes of Town Council, 17 December 1931.

188. NAD, 3/VRV, Minutes of the General Purposes Committee, 4 March 1929.

189. NAD, 3/VRV, Minutes of the General Purposes Committee, 7 November 1929.

190. NAD, 3/VRV, Minutes of the Works Committee, 13 November 1930.

several whites were engaged in relief works of a temporary nature.<sup>192</sup> Further investigations, later in 1932, showed that there were 22 unemployed men in the borough, 16 Europeans and 6 "coloureds".<sup>193</sup> The Council instituted relief works for these men, but this was seen as a temporary measure and they were discontinued in April 1933.<sup>194</sup> Following representations and investigation, these were re-instated because the level of distress was deemed to be acute. In one instance, seventeen destitute family members were said to be living in one house.<sup>195</sup>

Unemployment in the town of Ladysmith was greatly exacerbated by an influx of poor whites from surrounding areas.<sup>196</sup> In a list of the unemployed submitted to the local town council in October 1931, of the 31 white men who registered as unemployed, 15 had not been resident in Ladysmith for three years. Their previous occupations also give some idea of the nature of the distress, as 11 had been farmers, while 9 had been "artisans".<sup>197</sup> Instructions were given to the Borough Engineer to try to find employment for some of these men on works within the borough.<sup>198</sup> The Borough Engineer reported that there were eight Indians employed who could possibly be replaced by white workers, but as these men had long been in the employ of the council, they appear not to have been replaced.<sup>199</sup> Nothing significant was done to alleviate the distress in the borough and only two white men were employed on relief works in March 1932.<sup>200</sup> After representations were made by the Ladysmith Benevolent Society on behalf of twelve men on the books of the society, the council offered to make relief works available in the form of stone breaking.<sup>201</sup>

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191. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Town Council, 23 June 1931.

192. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Town Council, 19 July 1932.

193. NAD, 3/EST, Report of the Unemployment Relief Sub-Committee, 28 November 1932.

194. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Unemployment Relief Sub-Committee, 12 May 1933.

195. See NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Unemployment Relief Sub-Committee, 12 May 1933.

196. For a discussion of the position of "poor whites" in northern Natal, see Verne Harris, "Time to Trek: Landless Whites and Poverty in the Northern Natal Countryside, 1902-1939" in R Morrell (ed.), *White but Poor*, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 1991, pp. 57 - 74.

197. NAD, 3/LAD, List of unemployed submitted to the Finance Committee, 22 October 1931.

198. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 22 October 1931.

199. NAD, 3/LAD, Letter from Borough Engineer to Finance Committee, 26 October 1931.

200. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of the Works, Health/ Waterworks/Lands/Abattoir Committee, 17 March 1932.

No evidence could be found to suggest that this offer was ever taken up, but it does serve as an indication of the level of unemployment within the borough.

Unemployment among the Indian community of the town was also significant, as a letter from thirty-eight unemployed Indians connected to the Hindu Thirukutam Sabah showed:

We, being ratepayers within the Borough of Ladysmith, beg to earnestly request that owing to the distress prevailing amongst us owing to unemployment, that your council may be pleased to grant us employment or to consider some means of relieving the distressed condition we are in. Further to see your way clear to grant us extension of time within which to pay the rates that become due shortly.<sup>202</sup>

The council offered relief work in the form of stone breaking, but refused an extension of time for the payment of rates.<sup>203</sup> Again, there is no indication that the offer of relief works was ever taken up.

Distress among Africans in Ladysmith has proved even more difficult to quantify, but a sum of £50 was withdrawn from the Native Revenue Fund to alleviate distress among Africans in the borough

in view of the prevailing depression and the acute distress among the Natives at the present with little prospect of things improving in the immediate future.<sup>204</sup>

In the African reserves of Natal and Zululand, attempts were made by the Chief Native Commissioner to facilitate the employment of Africans "languishing" in the reserves. The distress in the reserves was becoming acute as a result of widespread drought and the discharge of Africans from normal employment in urban areas and on white farms. This situation greatly augmented the influx of Africans to the gold mines, to the extent that the mines of the Witwatersrand were swamped. The

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201. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of Finance Committee, 28 September 1933.

202. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 23 February 1933.

203. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of Finance Committee, 23 February 1933.

204. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of Finance Committee, 28 January 1932.

Secretary of Native Affairs (SNA) was moved to issue a departmental circular instructing that Africans be notified that there was no employment to be had on the gold mines. The circular noted that there were "several thousand" surplus African miners in compounds on the Reef, drawing rations while there was no work for them.<sup>205</sup> In addition, there were some 4 000 Africans "fruitlessly searching for work in Johannesburg", while in other Reef towns the position was similar:

Owing to the depression and drought conditions the number of Natives leaving employment and returning to their homes is much below normal...It seems hardly necessary to emphasise that the plight of a workless Native on the Witwatersrand is far worse than if he had remained in his home district.<sup>206</sup>

All Magistrates and Native Commissioners in Natal and Zululand were instructed to inform chiefs and to discourage Africans from going to the gold mines.<sup>207</sup>

A similar situation arose on the coal-mines of Natal. The Native Commissioner of Vryheid informed the Chief Native Commissioner in Pietermaritzburg (CNC PMB) that between 3 000 and 4 000 Africans had been retrenched from mines in the district, but unemployed Africans were still coming into the district, aggravating the unemployment amongst local Africans:

Local Native farm labour tenants who are required to render service to the farmers for half the year often spend months tramping about the District in search of employment. In the municipal location, there are many Natives who are living from hand to mouth and for whom no work of a permanent nature is available.<sup>208</sup>

A circular was issued by the CNC PMB to all Native Commissioners in Natal and Zululand, advising them to discourage Africans from seeking work on the coal-mines of Natal.<sup>209</sup>

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205. *South African Outlook*, 1 April 1932, placed the number of unemployed "boys" who were being fed as high as 4 000, while there were reputed to be 10 000 unemployed "Natives" on the Rand.

206. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, SNA Circular No. 2/1932, dated 25 January 1932.

207. *Ibid.*

208. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, Native Commissioner (NC) Vryheid to Chief Native Commissioner, Pietermaritzburg (CNC PMB), 23 February 1932.

Attempts were made by the Native Affairs Department to increase the chances of employment for Africans from Natal and Zululand reserves by restricting the influx of African labourers from areas outside Natal. These, however, were thwarted by farmers, who wanted to maintain their traditional supplies of labour.<sup>210</sup> It appears that, after representations from the SNA, the Chamber of Mines and the Native Recruiting Corporation (NRC) accepted the seriousness of the situation in the reserves of Natal and Zululand. At least they were prepared to assist by offering to employ such unemployed Africans from the reserves as they could accommodate and who might be willing to work on the mines. The NRC wished to gain some idea of the numbers which might be involved.<sup>211</sup> All Native Commissioners and Magistrates were telegraphed to provide statistics relating to a) the number of unemployed male Africans in their Districts, and b) how many of these were physically fit for mine work and were prepared to work on the mines. The replies are illuminating, but space does not permit a full discussion of each district's returns. Most NC's and Magistrates were able to provide approximate numbers, but nearly all said that mine work, particularly underground work, was not popular. It was found that there were some 53 800 unemployed African males in the reserves of Natal and Zululand, but that only 15 120 of these were fit for and prepared to undertake work on the mines.<sup>212</sup>

Magistrates and NC's in the reserves were asked to use their offices as employment bureaux to assist both local employers and unemployed Africans. This was not very successful, as few made use of the service, and in any event officials, overworked with the distribution of relief to Africans, had little time to spare. The number of

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209. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, CNC Circular No. 4/1932.

210. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, CNC PMB to SNA, 19 March 1932. These attempts will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

211. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, Telegram from NATLAB (NRC) to CNC PMB, 22 March 1932.

212. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, Telegram CNC PMB to NRC, 30 March 1932. Most of the figures were estimates, while some NC's and Magistrates admitted they had no idea of either the total number unemployed or the number of those willing to work on the mines. The statistics must therefore be treated with extreme caution, but they do provide evidence of serious unemployment in the reserves.

unemployed who actually registered was so small that these figures in no way represent the true situation in the reserves.<sup>213</sup> In other areas, farmers had a surfeit of labour:

Farmers have as much labour as they require, and in many cases more than they can pay for, and I am informed that Natives frequently offer to work without wages, simply to obtain food and a place to live.<sup>214</sup>

It is impossible to determine the full extent of unemployment among Africans in the reserves of Natal and Zululand. It is possible, however, to suggest that the severe drought and the prevailing economic downturn severely disrupted the normal employment patterns of the African inhabitants of the reserves. As an editorial in *Ilanga lase Natal* put it:

Were it possible to obtain authentic figures relating to unemployment among the Native population of the Union, we make bold to say that such figures would be positively alarming. It is beyond dispute that never in the history of South Africa has there been such destitution among the Bantu people...<sup>215</sup>

The circumstantial evidence strongly suggests that there were very many Africans who wished to work, but were unable to find gainful employment. They formed an unquantified, but nonetheless substantial, component of the unemployed masses.

Despite all the difficulties in assessment, a fairly clear picture has emerged of the seriousness of the situation with regard to unemployment in Natal. The severity of the problem, outside of the reserves, was greatest in the major urban centre of the province, Durban. This was largely due to the vulnerability of the economic basis on which the town was constructed; as international trade declined, commerce and industry, facing the resultant fall in demand for Natal's major products, sugar and coal, were forced to lay workers off, creating a massive problem for the local authorities. Yet the perception that Durban, and to a lesser extent,

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213. See correspondence in NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33.

214. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, NC Newcastle to CNC PMB, 25 April 1932.

215. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 18 August 1933.



Pietermaritzburg, were "greener pastures" continued to attract unemployed from elsewhere in Natal and indeed, in the Union, throughout the depression, thus exacerbating the situation.

Elsewhere in the province, local authorities also faced the problem of unemployment, but most had limited resources and could provide little in the way of relief. The more enterprising among the unemployed made the journey to the major urban centres, while many of those who remained appear to have eked out a precarious existence even during the best of times. When the depression struck, their small-scale farming and other enterprises simply collapsed, leaving them stranded.

The unemployed, unless they were enterprising enough to find alternative ways of earning a living, were forced to look to the state for assistance in their plight. The state, however, proved a poor provider, failing even to accurately quantify the problem *ab initio*. The major burden then fell on the ratepayers of the local authorities throughout the province. With the best will in the world, these local authorities (with few exceptions) felt obliged to assist only their burgesses, and then were limited by their individual capacities. Scant attention was paid to the unemployed of any group other than white adult males.

It must be seen as symptomatic of the attitudes of the time that this should have been so; but it must also be admitted that under the stress of the depression the racism and sexism that characterised Natal society at this time was greatly inflamed. Anti-Asiatic sentiment was rife; as was the *idée fixe* that Africans only worked when they wanted to and could always return to their idyllic rural places of origin to laze in the sun. This attitude was summed up by Mr Edward Holden of the Pietermaritzburg Chamber of Industries when he said:

...if the economic circumstances are pressing hardly on the Natives as the evidence before this Commission would lead one to believe, then with regard to a very large proportion of the Native population, the remedy is in their own hands, because they can work for a longer period per year. I, personally, cannot — and I doubt whether any member of the Commission can — afford to have four to six months' holiday

per year, which is the usual thing with the majority of rural Natives. Therefore, we say, if economic circumstances press heavily on the Native as reputed, he can alter things himself by working for a longer period per year.<sup>216</sup>

The truth of the matter is that a substantial number of Africans were indeed seeking work for longer periods to tide themselves and their families over the depression and the devastating drought in the rural areas. However, government policies such as the "civilised labour" policy and the Wage Act, either prevented them finding employment or even led to their displacement by white workers when they were successful.

Whites believed that in the natural order of things they should not be made to suffer this most visible of wounds caused by the depression, and that white employment should be safeguarded and expanded at the expense of other races. Taking this into account, it is significant that despite all the measures adopted, white unemployment in Natal still attained the proportions which it did. Conversely, although quantification is impossible, it is worth pondering that if white unemployment reached the levels it did with all the machinery of the state and the prevailing *weltanschauung* operating in favour of job creation for whites, how much worse the situation of other groups must have been, as they were the targets of this prejudice and discriminatory action.

In conclusion, it is worth remembering exactly what unemployment meant to the average white person living at this time, brought up to believe that working was a divinely ordained activity; and the loss of employment some kind of divine visitation. The loss of employment meant that families lost their financial mainstay and the decline into poverty was often a short fall for many of even the middle class. Faced with the inability to provide for their families, many men deserted them, rather than face the daily reproach in the eyes of those who had come to depend on them.<sup>217</sup> Many of the unemployed experienced psychological problems; feelings of inadequacy, depression, despondency, lassitude and helplessness overcame them.<sup>218</sup>

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216. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Mr Edward Holden, Pietermaritzburg, 9 April 1931, pp. 6683 - 6684.

217. *Natal Mercury*, 6 November 1929, 27 August 1931 and 5 November 1931.

218. See letter from "Grudge against Society", *Natal Mercury*, 19 November 1931.

The unemployed felt trapped in a web of circumstance that they could neither understand nor escape.<sup>219</sup>

John Dube saw the unemployment of whites from a different angle. In an article which related tales of whites begging from Africans, he wrote:

I believe that one would have been shot down stone dead if ten years ago he would have predicted that Europeans would one day sink to a level of digging roads, pushing wheelbarrows loaded with dirty sand and wearing torn trousers and without shirts, working to earn their bread. When one sees these things happening and the onesidedness of the Government in reserving employment only to Europeans...one cannot fail to deduce that God moves very mysteriously to protect the downtrodden peoples against their oppressors. It is really miraculous that in the face of all open gateways to employment for Europeans, yet they should get no employment. And the Natives with no employment at all should spare a penny to give to Europeans who happen to cross their ways hunger-dying [sic]...<sup>220</sup>

It was to prevent the development of such a view of the white overlords that the government was to direct its efforts at relieving the distress caused by unemployment. Dube shows that these efforts were not entirely successful. Why this should have been so forms the basis of the following chapter.

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219. Rees, *The Great Slump*, p. 89.

220. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 11 November 1932.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### ATTEMPTS TO RELIEVE DISTRESS AND UNEMPLOYMENT IN NATAL

As the depression deepened and unemployment grew, citizens of all the affected nations began to look to their respective governments for assistance. It was realised that the magnitude of the crisis was such that only government intervention could halt the plunge into chaos. Most people could not fully comprehend the complex causes of the depression, and turned to their elected representatives whom they believed, initially at least, had both the ability and the power to set matters to rights. Most governments in the western world did react sympathetically, although often their actions were hampered by their limited knowledge of economics and the conservative *laissez faire* principles to which many of them subscribed. As Robertson and Walton wrote of the situation in the United States:

As Americans suffered through the first two years of the Depression, they analyzed the causes of their troubles in everyday language, and suggested cures. Some of these analyses were astonishingly accurate, and many of the remedies proposed, had they been tried, might well have prevented the precipitate declines in income and employment that characterized the late stages of the Depression. But remedies potent enough to be very effective required a radically different approach to public finance and a revolutionary concept of the role of the federal government in times of economic crisis. The administration of Herbert Hoover, who was elected to office on promises of a safe, conservative program, was simply incapable of the radical, imaginative leadership that alone could have saved the day.<sup>1</sup>

The failure of the Labour government in Britain to respond adequately in the early years of the depression has likewise been explained by Beloff:

The Economic Policy Committee set up by MacDonald in January 1930 which also had Keynes as a member failed to make any impact upon governmental thinking. But in the light of the orthodoxies then prevailing both at home and abroad, it

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1. Robertson and Walton, *History of the American Economy*, p. 412.

seems unreasonable to single out the MacDonald government as particularly ineffective and obtuse.<sup>2</sup>

South Africans too began to look to their government to assist them in this crisis. The Hertzog government, like most other conservative governments in the capitalist world that were affected by the depression, seemed reluctant to embark on any radical economic changes. Prior to the depression, the government had already established procedures for dealing with unemployment among whites both in the urban and rural areas and simply expanded these during much of the depression period. The government did, however, appear to believe that white employment was a government priority. It perceived a threat to the civil order in the influx of unemployed "poor whites" into the cities of the Union, which had begun in the 1880s.<sup>3</sup> It was partly for this reason that the Hertzog government had instituted the "civilised labour" policy and had created a government ministry, the Department of Labour, to promote white employment in the urban areas.

Unemployment in the Union was evident in both rural and urban areas. As has already been demonstrated, agriculture in the Union was experiencing a period of considerable tribulation. Low producer prices and various natural factors had forced many ill-educated, unskilled whites off their farms. Drifting to the major urban centres, they competed for the lowliest menial jobs with black workers. Similarly, many Africans in the rural areas of Natal and Zululand, hard hit by the depression and the crippling drought, also sought to survive by obtaining work in the urban areas. These urban centres had unemployment problems of their own, which were greatly aggravated by the arrival of outsiders.

In an effort to stem the rising tide of unemployment, the government embarked on a multi-pronged strategy. Not only would the problem of urban unemployment have to be addressed, but attempts would have to be made to halt the drift to the towns; firstly by improving conditions on the land to keep white farmers on their farms, and secondly by providing assistance to the rural unemployed in their own areas and

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2. Beloff, *Wars and Welfare*, p. 168.

3. See J Grobler, "Die Verskynsel van Verarmde Blankes in Suid-Afrika", Unpublished paper presented at 8th Biennial Meeting of the South African Historical Society, Durban, 1981 and Morrell, *White but Poor*.

making them ineligible for assistance in the urban areas.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, legislative and administrative measures were to be taken to stem the influx of Africans into urban areas, to reduce the competition for work.<sup>5</sup>

Turning to the rural areas of Natal first, it is worth noting that the government did comparatively little specifically for the rural white unemployed in this province<sup>6</sup> during the depression years, as the "poor white" problem was far greater elsewhere in the Union.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the Nationalist Party only enjoyed majority support amongst farmers in northern Natal, the rest of the farming community of the province being mainly composed of South African Party stalwarts.

However, even if on a smaller scale, attempts to alleviate the distress in the rural areas of Natal did form part of the country-wide government initiative. As Minnaar wrote:

The majority of these relief schemes were aimed specifically at alleviating the plight of the rural poor, many of whom were ex-farmers forced off the land by the calamitous combination of economic depression, drought and natural disasters. This legislation favoured the rural and agricultural sector since it was this section of the populace (besides the blacks in the reserves) which had experienced the most distress and hardship, and because the government was also very sensitive to criticisms that they were neglecting the rural poor (i.e. the group known as Poor Whites). In parliament the agricultural lobby was powerful since the government was conscious that it received major political support from this sector.<sup>8</sup>

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4. This strategy was outlined at an Unemployment Conference chaired by the Minister of Labour, Colonel F H P Cresswell, in September 1931. It was decided there that no man should be given relief work unless he had been resident in the relevant urban area for at least two years. Minnaar, "White Agriculture", p. 250; see also Minnaar, "Unemployment", pp. 54 - 55.
  5. These measures will be discussed in Chapter Ten.
  6. This is obviously excluding the veritable plethora of measures taken by the government to assist agriculture throughout the Union. For a discussion of these see Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", pp. 207 - 237.
  7. Harris makes the point that although the poor white problem definitely did exist in northern Natal at this time, it has generally been neglected by most writers. See Harris, "Time to Trek", p. 57. For general information, see Lewis, "Poor White Problem", passim; Minnaar has recently pointed out that the problems of rural unemployment and "Poor Whiteism" became blurred during the depression. See Minnaar, "Unemployment", p. 46.

Several schemes were in operation in Natal. The first, initiated in the 1920s, was the forestry project at Weza in southern Natal. Farmers who had been forced off their land were engaged by the Department of Forestry to conduct afforestation, and were allowed to farm small plots on their own account. Workers were employed on a permanent basis and were paid reasonably well. They were given free medical treatment and education for their children, while their accommodation cost only 10s per month. This settlement, in common with others established elsewhere in the Union, expanded during the depression years, but no details of the exact number of persons so assisted in Natal can be found.<sup>9</sup>

The second project, the Drakensberg Reclamation Scheme, was only launched in 1934. It was aimed at replanting the slopes of the Drakensberg with suitable vegetation to prevent soil erosion and was expected to provide work for some 500 unemployed men from Natal and the Orange Free State.<sup>10</sup> The third project was undertaken by the South African Railways. It involved, amongst other things, the straightening of the railway-lines in northern Natal. The project was planned in 1933/34,<sup>11</sup> and by 1935<sup>12</sup> was providing work for 700 men on the Glencoe-Volksrust line, while another 500 men were at work on the Natal main line at Boscobello. No provision was made for the families of the "European labourers" employed on the former scheme, while a model village was built to accommodate the families on the Boscobello scheme. In addition, by 1934/35, a further 104 white labourers had been found permanent employment on the Railways in Durban.<sup>13</sup>

These projects in Natal (and indeed, the many other such rural projects initiated elsewhere in the Union) may be likened to the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps in the United States of America, although the workers were never administered by a single authority in the Union as they were in America.<sup>14</sup>

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8. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 269.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 251 - 253; see also Minnaar, "Unemployment", pp. 65 - 66.

10. Union of South Africa, *Year Book*, No 16, 1933/34, p. 195 and Minnaar, "Unemployment", p. 69.

11. Union of South Africa, *Union Year Book No. 16*, 1933/34, p. 195.

12. J Taylor, "Building Railways and 'Building Character': The Model Villages in Northern Natal, c.1935-1939", *Contree*, Vol. 35, June 1994, p. 32.

The other major project aimed at relieving unemployment among rural communities in Natal was mounted by the Natal Provincial Administration (NPA). Even before the onset of the depression, Parliament had voted £1 000 000 for the creation of employment opportunities for whites on road-building schemes to be administered by the provinces. Natal was allocated some £200 000 for this purpose in 1929/30. Some 241 men were employed in Natal on road-building throughout the province at the end of June 1930.<sup>15</sup> This number increased steadily to 537 in June 1931 and then to 660 in December of that year, before declining to 355 in June 1932. The decline in number was caused by a shortage of funds. When more money was made available, the number increased once more to 1 065 in December 1932, before falling again to 993 in June 1933 and then to 948 in December 1933. Some 480 were still so employed in June 1934.<sup>16</sup> In total, the Natal Provincial Administration received some £15 641 in addition to the earlier grant of £200 000, considerably less than either the Transvaal or the Cape,<sup>17</sup> where numbers employed on road works were far higher.<sup>18</sup> This fact was seized upon by Natalian opponents of the government.<sup>19</sup> Employment was largely confined to whites but, as will be shown later, the NPA also contributed to relief works on roads in the African reserves of Natal and Zululand.

The Provincial Administration also made subsidies available to municipalities for the employment of semi-fit men on relief works in the urban areas. It was mainly white men who benefited, although a small number of "coloured" men were also subsidised. The sums expended are shown in table 8.1.

**Table 8.1**  
**Amounts expended by the Natal Provincial Administration in**  
**Subsidies to Municipalities in respect of the employment**  
**of semi-fit labourers on relief works,**  
**1930/31 - 1934/35, in £**

Year	Amount Budgetted	Amount Spent
1930/31	2 100/00/00	2 101/05/09
1931/32	4 800/00/00	5 294/12/05
1932/33	6 000/00/00	4 286/18/08
1933/34	4 000/00/00	3 177/12/02
1934/35	3 600/00/00	3 700/00/00

**Source:** Annual Reports of the Provincial Auditor for relevant years.



It must be understood that the NPA operated within severe financial constraints, as the central government kept very tight control of the purse strings. In fact, it appears that the central government wanted to abolish the Provincial Councils during the depression years, ostensibly as "an economy measure", and was thus attempting to demonstrate that the councils were not financially viable. Like the administration of the Orange Free State, the NPA was constantly having to go cap in hand to the central government for funds.<sup>20</sup> Relief could only be afforded, therefore, within limits imposed by the central government.

In the reserves of Natal, and especially in those of Zululand, a crippling drought began to make itself felt early in 1931.<sup>21</sup> The depression was also beginning to have a serious affect on the employment of Africans but initially, the drought was a far more serious threat to the welfare of thousands of people. Reports were received of widespread shortages of food due to crop failures,<sup>22</sup> while the price of maize was

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13. Union of South Africa, *Union Year Book*, No. 17, 1934/35, p. 210.
  14. For similar projects in the United States see L A Lacey, *The Soil Soldiers: The Civilian Conservation Corps in the Great Depression*, Chiltern, Radnor, 1976.
  15. Union of South Africa, *Year Book*, No. 12, 1929/30, p. 188.
  16. Union of South Africa, *Year Book* No. 13, 1930/31, p. 161 and No. 16, 1933/34, p. 196.
  17. Annual Reports of the Auditor-General for relevant years.
  18. Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 267.
  19. See below, pp. 327 - 328.
  20. For a discussion of this aspect see Thompson, *Natalians First*, pp. 50 - 59.
  21. La Hausse claims that the drought began as early as 1929 in the Ubombo district. He claims that the crisis in Zululand in the early 1930s "...compelled the state to initiate a widespread relief programme in 1934." La Hausse, "Ethnicity and History", p. 324. This date is obviously incorrect in the light of what follows.
  22. See as examples, correspondence in NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), of which the following is a selection: Native Commissioner (NC) Melmoth to Chief Native Commissioner, Pietermaritzburg (CNC PMB), 25 February 1931; Telegram from Bishop of Zululand to CNC PMB, 10 September 1931; NC Nongoma to CNC PMB, 17 September 1931; *Ibid*, 18 September 1931, reporting "...serious shortage of food in the whole District..."; NC Ubombo to CNC PMB, 19 September 1931; Assistant NC Mhlabatini to CNC PMB, 18 September 1931.

rocketing accordingly.<sup>23</sup> The Native Commissioner (NC) at Nongoma, Mr Braatvedt, composed a circular to storekeepers asking them to keep the price of maize down, or else the government would be forced to bring in maize and sell it to Africans more cheaply. This threat did bring about some reduction in price, as storekeepers were fearful that if it were carried out, their stocks would go unbought and they would suffer losses.<sup>24</sup> The situation became so critical that Braatvedt was forced to telegraph the Chief Native Commissioner, Pietermaritzburg (CNC PMB) asking for Nongoma and Mhlabatini to be declared drought disaster areas. "CATTLE DYING FAST NO RAIN NATIVES SHORT OF CASH AM INFORMED MANY ON BRINK OF STARVATION".<sup>25</sup> The NC of Eshowe had a similar tale to tell; reporting on the situation in the worst drought-affected area of Tugela Ferry, he wrote, "Scarcely any cattle left alive, donkeys and goats are now dying." Maize was being brought in but roads in the district were bad. He suggested that relief work on roads in the area would be a useful way of dealing with the situation.<sup>26</sup> Nongoma, Mhlabatini and Hlabisa were declared drought-stricken areas, which enabled the importation of fodder and the transportation of cattle and maize at reduced rates.<sup>27</sup> This did not meet with the approval of the NC Nongoma, who wanted maize to be imported into the area free of charge, or at much further reduced rates, so that the storekeepers could sell maize more cheaply.<sup>28</sup>

It was then realised that maize would have to be made available in certain areas of Zululand. The drought had had such crippling effects that not only had all crops

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23. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), NC Ingwavuma to CNC PMB, 8 April 1931. Maize was being sold at 26s per bag, while some (unspecified) traders were selling at 50s per bag in the remoter areas. There were many other examples of increases in price, most averaging 2s per bag over the previous few months. This took place at a time when the maize price was falling elsewhere in the Union, so by obtaining maize from elsewhere in the Union, storekeepers could make handsome profits. For details of the maize price see Table 6.2 above.
  24. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), NC Nongoma to CNC PMB, 17 September 1931.
  25. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), Telegram NC Nongoma to CNC PMB, 24 September 1931.
  26. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), NC Eshowe to CNC PMB, 23 September 1931.
  27. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), Telegram Secretary of Native Affairs (SNA) to CNC PMB, 30 September 1931.
  28. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), CNC PMB to SNA, 3 October 1931.

failed, but where cattle were still left alive, they were generally so emaciated and in such poor condition that storekeepers were unwilling to take them in exchange for maize. Though this assistance was aimed at keeping body and soul together, it did not operate to the long-term benefit of the impoverished people of the reserves. The maize was made available by the government on promissory notes, and records were kept of those recipients who had cattle and those who had not. Those with cattle would be obliged to repay the cost of the maize, including the cost of transport, while those without would be treated as paupers.<sup>29</sup> Recipients had to undertake to repay the full costs, not only of the maize (approximately 9s per bag), but also of the costs of transportation, so that the final cost was somewhere in the region of 15s or 16s per bag.<sup>30</sup> The "beneficiaries" would inevitably have to go and work to earn this money. If there seemed little likelihood of the African being able to earn the money to meet the promissory note, maize was not given to him, and he had to depend on the charity of others.<sup>31</sup>

The decision to begin supplying maize was lauded by *Ilanga lase Natal* which stated that the authorities had acted "with commendable promptitude and foresight".<sup>32</sup> The CNC PMB warned in a telegram that any efforts to bypass the storekeepers would result in problems:

CONSIDER IT MOST IMPOLITIC ENTER INTO  
COMPETITION WITH TRADERS IF THIS CAN BE  
AVOIDED ESPECIALLY AS PRESENT CONDITIONS  
HAVE ALREADY HIT MOST OF THEM HARD.<sup>33</sup>

Efforts were then made to secure co-operation from the traders in the affected areas but with little success, and the distribution of maize by magistrates and NCs began. The traders protested vehemently,<sup>34</sup> and continued to do so well into 1932:

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29. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), SNA to CNC PMB, 7 October 1931.

30. Hansard, Col. 1323, 22 February 1932.

31. Letter from "Observer", Matubatuba [sic], *The Farmer*, 8 April 1932, p. 23.

32. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 20 November 1931.

33. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), CNC PMB to SNA, 8 October 1931.

34. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), CNC PMB to SNA, 14 October 1931.

...no efforts are being made to ascertain whether the case are indigent or not [sic] and the result is that the storekeepers in the vicinity are doing no mealie trade at all.<sup>35</sup>

Initially, the SNA was unmoved, telegraphing that "...medical and other reports on malnutrition outweigh all that traders may say..."<sup>36</sup> A storm of protest was unleashed from traders, newspapers and even members of parliament.<sup>37</sup> Nor were these efforts appreciated by farmers, who complained to the Minister of Native Affairs. By 1932 the response was sympathetic:

The Minister of Native Affairs has directed that officers charged with the distribution of mealies for the relief of distress among the Native population should keep in touch with the Farmers' Associations and consult them in regard to the labour requirements of their respective Districts. On no account must mealies be supplied or assistance given to Natives who refuse work available for them on farms. Please instruct all officers concerned in the area under your control to give effect to the Minister's wishes.<sup>38</sup>

Many believed that supplying Africans with food would diminish the labour supply: "...the wholesale dishing out of mealies must inevitably lead to the supply of labour becoming frozen".<sup>39</sup> The *Witness* was even more vehement in its criticism:

Charity, where wisely used, is, without doubt a very good thing, yet there has arisen in Natal today a situation that is striking at the roots of white prestige and authority and inter-racial commerce. The Government has extended the open palm

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35. NAD, CNC, Vol. 95A, File 68/1 (Part II), F P Bull (Secretary of Zululand Chamber of Commerce to CNC, Pietermaritzburg, 18 April 1932.

36. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), SNA to CNC PMB, 15 October 1931.

37. See the following selections from NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I); O R Nel (Greytown) to SNA, 11 October 1931; SNA to CNC PMB, 31 October 1931; SNA to CNC PMB, 4 November 1931, relaying contents of telegram from Heaton Nicholls; C F Adams (representing Zululand traders) to CNC PMB, 7 November 1931; *Natal Mercury*, 10 November 1931; G Heaton Nicholls to CNC PMB, 7 November 1931; W H Haupt (District Surgeon of Nongoma) to E G Jansen, Minister of Native Affairs (MNA), 25 November 1931; O R Nel to MNA, 9 December 1931; F H Bull (Secretary, Zululand Chamber of Commerce) to CNC PMB, 17 December 1931; *Natal Mercury*, 22 December 1931; *Natal Witness*, 18 January 1931.

38. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 95A, File 68/1 (Part II), Secretary of Native Affairs to CNC, PMB, 19 July 1932.

39. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), O R Nel to MNA, 9 December 1931.

instead of the mailed fist. Procrastination is the greatest weakness of the Native and the Government has played right into the Natives' hands. How many Natives are to be seen today attempting to be self-supporting? Practically none. They have discovered that the Government will supply their greatest need — and their indolence grows apace.<sup>40</sup>

However, both Archdeacon A W Lee (a noted expert on Zululand) and Mr S D Malcolm, Engineer with the Native Affairs Department and the official in charge of the distribution of relief, both argued that the situation was becoming worse by the day and that only half the normal planting had been undertaken.<sup>41</sup> By January 1932, 23 900 bags of maize had been issued to starving Africans in the reserves.<sup>42</sup> The drought situation was so bad in some areas that even the sugar planters had been forced to dismiss African workers, greatly aggravating the unemployment situation and raising the general level of distress considerably. Some Africans were so desperate that they were offering to work for four months for one bag of maize.<sup>43</sup>

Nor was there any sign of matters improving:

ESTABLISHED RELIEF RAPIDLY OUTGROWING  
EXISTING RESOURCES X NUMEROUS NEW  
DISTRICTS DEMANDING IMMEDIATE RELIEF WHICH  
CANNOT BE SUPPLIED EXCEPT AT EXPENSE OF  
ESTABLISHED AREAS.<sup>44</sup>

The worsening situation, and the barrage of criticism directed at the NAD's attempts to relieve distress through the distribution of maize, led to the CNC PMB, Mr J Mould Young and Mr S D Malcolm being summoned urgently to Cape Town for

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40. *Natal Witness*, 18 January 1932.

41. See interview with A W Lee, *Natal Mercury*, 22 December 1931 and NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), S D Malcolm to CNC PMB, 29 December 1931. This view was also shared by *Ilanga Lase Natal*, which wrote: "Between the White and the Black Imfolozi [sic] there will be no harvest, and most of their [the Africans'] stock is dead which places the Natives in an intolerable state." *Ilanga lase Natal*, 12 February 1932.

42. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1, SNA to CNC PMB, 6 January 1932.

43. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), S D Malcolm to CNC PMB, 29 December 1931.

44. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), CNC PMB to SNA, 8 January 1932.

discussions with the SNA, Major Herbst and the Minister of Native Affairs, Mr E G Jansen. It was decided that the existing system of relief in the reserves of Natal and Zululand should be replaced by a system of relief works:

It has been decided that the present system of establishing depots in every magistracy from which mealies are issued to distressed natives should be abandoned as soon as possible, and there will be substituted a scheme of relief works, and every effort made to absorb natives in connection with irrigation schemes, road work, and in any other sort of work which can be devised.<sup>45</sup>

The Treasury and the Cabinet were growing anxious at the funds being expended on relieving distress in Zululand, while the unemployment situation of whites was daily growing more serious. Instructions were issued that no Africans were to be assisted outside of the reserves and that maize should be issued sparingly.<sup>46</sup> *Ilanga lase Natal* was naturally very critical of the stance taken by those opposed to relief measures, especially the storekeepers. In an article entitled "The Zulus are Starving", the newspaper drew attention to the plight of the people in the affected reserves and praised the attempts of the authorities to alleviate distress. It added a note of warning to the storekeepers:

But the storekeepers who derive good business from the Natives in normal times had complained that the Government is interfering with their business in giving the dole of mealies to starving Natives. Others in town and country seem to be glad to have Natives offer their services for 5s. a month, and in some cases work only for board and lodging as is the case in the Vryheid district. Relief works promised by the Government cannot absorb all Natives who are famine stricken; and the prejudice against Government help shown by a certain class of white people, may alter the attitude of the Native towards the Government, and the day may come when the storekeepers may need the support of the Natives.<sup>47</sup>

By February 1932, a staggering 38 300 bags of maize had been ordered for distribution,<sup>48</sup> of which the following had actually been issued:

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45. *Natal Mercury*, 22 January 1932.

46. CAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), SNA telegram to CNC PMB, 26 January 1932.

47. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 12 February 1932.

48. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), CNC PMB to SNA, 29 January 1932.

Mhlabatini	5 500 bags
Weenen	518 bags
Louwsburg	451 bags
Nongoma	10 881 bags
Hlabisa	737 bags
Kranskop	2 502 bags
Ladysmith	729 bags
Tugela Ferry	5 267 bags
Newcastle	36 bags
Helpmekaar	600 bags
Babanango	500 bags
Greytown	2 396 bags
Eshowe	350 bags (Relief Works)
Nkandhla	60 bags (Relief Works)
<b>Total:</b>	<b>30 577 bags<sup>49</sup></b>

The seriousness of the situation was highlighted by a communication from the Senior Veterinary Officer for Natal, who informed the CNC PMB that cattle losses Between June and November, 1931 had been catastrophic:

	<b>Native Areas of Natal and Zululand</b>	<b>On Crown Land Occupied by Africans</b>
June	13 060	268
July	15 850	332
August	19 923	370
September	32 403	422
October	42 134	817
November	39 723	686
<b>Total</b>	<b>203 326</b>	<b>2 905</b>

Total cattle losses by Africans in reserves and on crown land were thus 206 231.<sup>50</sup>

The government, unmoved, decided that no further funds would be made available for the issue of maize to Africans, after 31 March 1932. Ten thousand bags of maize were bought to tide relief efforts over 1932/33.<sup>51</sup> The SNA issued the following instructions:

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49. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), CNC PMB to SNA, 4 February 1932.

50. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), Senior Veterinary Officer to CNC PMB, 8 February 1932.

51. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, (Part I), SNA telegram to CNC PMB, 9 March 1932.

Owing to the necessity for husbanding the limited funds available for the relief of distress in order that they may be utilized to the greatest advantage...The issuing of mealies in bulk should be discontinued and that in future strictly limited rations of mealies should be issued solely for the relief of specific cases of actual starvation...The underlying principle is that the Department will in these cases provide the bare means of subsistence and the scale upon which mealies are issued should be similar to that of pauper rations.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to the need to conserve resources, there were other considerations, as the SNA indicated:

Care should be exercised that no relief is extended to Natives who refuse work. Many complaints have been received that work has been refused on the grounds that the Government's relief measures have rendered it unnecessary.<sup>53</sup>

The purchase of 10 000 bags of maize was a mistake, as the CNC PMB pointed out,<sup>54</sup> as much of the maize would undoubtedly be spoilt by infestations of weevils but the SNA telegraphed "...FULLY REALISE DIFFICULTIES MENTIONED BUT NO MONEY WILL BE AVAILABLE NEXT YEAR...RELYING ON YOUR CO-OPERATION IN MEETING DIFFICULT POSITION AND SAFEGUARDING NATIVE INTEREST."<sup>55</sup>

The distribution of maize continued, albeit on a much smaller scale and as late as 1937, maize was still being distributed in certain parts of Zululand.<sup>56</sup> A total of some 50 100 bags of maize had been purchased for distribution by April 1932.<sup>57</sup>

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52. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), SNA to CNC PMB, 23 February 1932.

53. *Ibid.*

54. Mould Young appears to have been determined to place his fears on record, for he sent two telegrams to the SNA warning of weevils. In the second (confidential) telegram he advised: "...GREATLY FEAR THIS WILL LEAD TO SCANDAL AND MUST AGAIN GRAVELY URGE SUITABLE ACCOMMODATION SHOULD BE OBTAINED WHERE GRAIN IS HELD FOR DELIVERY". See NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), CNC PMB to SNA, 9 March 1932 and *Ibid.*, 10 December 1932.

55. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), SNA telegram to CNC PMB, 9 March 1932.

56. See NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 95A, 96A and 97A.

57. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 95A, File 68/1 (Part II), SNA to CNC PMB, 19 April 1932.



The idea of beginning relief works was followed up by Malcolm, who devised plans to construct and repair roads, to build stock dams and irrigation works and a causeway over the Umvoti River, at an estimated cost of £81 250.<sup>58</sup> This figure was drastically reduced by the CNC PMB, for the plan he submitted to the SNA would cost only £20 625, of which £16 375 was included in departmental estimates for the year 1932/33.<sup>59</sup> Most of the planned works involved road repair and road-building, although some stock dams were also to be built. It was proposed that, as in Eshowe and Nkandhla, Africans on relief works were to be paid in maize, not cash.

No evidence could be found regarding conditions on these relief works, nor on the numbers receiving assistance. Malcolm estimated that 600 Africans would be employed, but it is not known if this figure was achieved or exceeded. It appears that the scheme was put into operation, as the Natal Provincial Administration contributed £1 000 towards the costs, despite being committed to a "White Labour Policy" on the road works it administered.<sup>60</sup> It was reported in January 1933 that "great difficulty" was being experienced finding sufficient labour for the relief works in Zululand, which was seen as a sign that they were no longer necessary.<sup>61</sup>

The Native Affairs Department (NAD) spent £35 800 on famine relief in Natal and Zululand in 1931/32, some 81 per cent of its total expenditure for the Union in that year. It also wrote off some £30 000 of the taxes owed by Africans, which also helped Africans to some extent.<sup>62</sup>

However, these were not the only measures adopted by the NAD to alleviate the distress in the reserves. Already discussed in an earlier chapter was the department's attempt to involve the African population of the reserves in the growing of sugar-cane.<sup>63</sup> Their efforts at liaising with the South African Sugar

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58. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), Undated plan by S D Malcolm forwarded to CNC PMB.

59. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part I), CNC PMB to SNA, 29 March 1932.

60. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 94A, File 68/1 (Part 1), CNC PMB to SNA, 31 March 1932.

61. *South African Outlook*, 2 January 1933. No one appears to have ascribed this lack of enthusiasm to the extremely exploitative conditions on these relief works. Relief workers were only paid in maize; no cash changed hands.

62. Cope, *To Bind the Nation*, p. 262.

Association in this regard, however, were largely unsuccessful. In a confidential letter to the CNC PMB, the SNA wrote: "It does not look if you are going to get much help from the Sugar Association, it is just all talk as usual."<sup>64</sup>

In January 1932, as a direct result of the chronic unemployment and the high level of distress prevalent in the reserves of Natal and Zululand, the CNC PMB decided to boost the employment of Africans from these areas, by refusing entry passes to those who were termed "extra-Natal Natives". A circular was issued to all Magistrates and Native Commissioners throughout the province, advising them to refuse to issue such passes.<sup>65</sup> The farmers of the province soon got wind of this, and a flood of complaints began to pour in. Many farmers, especially wattle and cane growers, used "extra-Natal" African labour from Basutoland, Transkei and Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique) and actually preferred such labour to Zulu, for a variety of reasons.<sup>66</sup>

Mould Young received support from Herbst, but also a warning:

We ought to prevent Portuguese Natives coming over your borders now but you will have to be very careful that the farmers do not get wind of any instructions you may give or we will get the reaction in the House [of Assembly] at once...<sup>67</sup>

This warning was already too late, as the sugar farmers, led by Heaton Nicholls and Duncan Eadie, had already made it clear that this state of affairs was not acceptable to them. An attempt by the CNC to placate the sugar and wattle farmers by exempting those "extra-Natal" workers who were employed on a contract or semi-permanent basis,<sup>68</sup> was unsuccessful and Mould Young was forced to telegraph for

63. See Chapter Six.

64. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, SNA to CNC PMB, 2 March 1932.

65. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, Circular No. 1/32, 27 January 1932.

66. There were many letters of complaint and the following are merely a selection: NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, Underberg Farmer's Association to Magistrate Himeville, 22 March 1932; CNC PMB to D M Eadie (Secretary of the SA Sugar Association), 24 February 1932.

67. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, Confidential letter from SNA to CNC PMB, 18 February 1932.

68. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, Circular 3/32 from CNC to all Magistrates and Native Commissioners, 4 February 1932.

permission to revoke the ban entirely, and this was granted.<sup>69</sup> In two subsequent communications, the CNC PMB blamed the withdrawal of the ban on the opposition from cane and wattle farmers.<sup>70</sup> Fears of insufficiency and "unsuitability" in African labour therefore thwarted this attempt to raise the employment level of Africans from the reserves of Natal and Zululand.

A further attempt to increase the employment of Africans from the reserves on the gold mines of the Witwatersrand, detailed in the previous chapter,<sup>71</sup> also appears to have come to naught, mainly due to the aversion many Zulu-speaking Africans had to working underground. Despite the relatively high levels of unemployment and considerable distress prevalent in the reserves, many Africans refused to volunteer for mine work.<sup>72</sup>

There may indeed have been a tendency for Africans, even under the direst of domestic circumstances, to refuse to offer themselves for work. Some feared malaria:

Although there are many young men now at their kraals, they are disinclined to go out to work. The general excuse is that they are afraid of contracting malarial fever.<sup>73</sup>

Other Africans simply refused to enter the wage-labour market.<sup>74</sup> Fears were constantly expressed that Africans were "taking advantage of the Government" and that their "natural indolence" was being catered to by the distribution of relief maize. Farmers were especially brutal in their condemnation of the NAD's efforts to

69. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, SNA to CNC, 18 March 1933.

70. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, CNC PMB to SNA, 19 March 1932 and 5 April 1932.

71. See Chapter Seven.

72. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, CNC PMB to Native Recruiting Corporation (NRC), 30 March 1932.

73. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 97A, File 68/33, Magistrate Nongoma to T Wilson (Farmer) Gingindhlovu, 13 April 1932.

74. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 95A, File 68/1 (Part III), NC Weenen to CNC PMB, 21 September 1933. See also CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Gilbert Manning Robinson representing the Zululand Farmers' Union, Empangeni, 26 September 1930, p. 1818.

alleviate the distress caused by the drought and the depression. Ever-sensitive to the farmers' opinions, the government was forced to remind those involved in relief work that:

The Minister of Native Affairs has directed that officers charged with the distribution of mealies for the relief of distress amongst the Native population should keep in touch with the Farmers' Association and consult them in regard to the labour requirements of their respective Districts. On no account must mealies be supplied or assistance given to Natives who refuse work available for them on farms. Please instruct all officers concerned in the area under your control to give effect to the Minister's wishes.<sup>75</sup>

In conclusion, it is difficult to assess the success of the government's measures aimed at alleviating the distress caused to the African population of the reserves by the twin disasters of depression and drought. Many of the attempts of the NAD were thwarted by the vested interests of white farmers and storekeepers, of whom many expected to benefit from the tribulations of Africans. What is certain is that the Africans in the reserves did suffer a great deal of hardship, and that the government achieved considerably less than it might have in its attempts to alleviate the distress.

In the urban areas, where Natal's major unemployment problem among whites lay, the chief government agency concerned with the relief of unemployment was the Department of Labour. The Department of Labour<sup>76</sup> was intended to assist unemployed white males in a number of ways: firstly, it would keep records of the unemployed and act as a labour bureau, attempting to match employers who required labour with suitably qualified workers. Secondly, the Department would assist by subsidising, from its budget, various job-creation projects and by recompensing employing authorities which replaced cheap black labour with more expensive white workers (in line with the "civilised labour" policy). This, in effect, was to be one of the chief instruments of the government in its attempts to relieve unemployment, for this policy applied equally to those authorities employing "civilised labour" on a permanent basis and to those that chose to employ such workers in a temporary capacity, as relief workers. Thirdly, it would co-ordinate

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75. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 95A, File 68/1 (Part II), SNA to CNC PMB, 19 July 1932.

76. The government also made use of the Post Office in the rural areas where the Department of Labour had no offices.

activities and ensure minimal overlapping of relief efforts. Beyond this, the government was reluctant to go.<sup>77</sup>

This policy decision thrust most of the burden of relieving the distress caused by unemployment in the urban areas onto the local authorities, a role which most were reluctant to accept, as the following resolution illustrates:

This Council holds that the problem of unemployment of whites as now below [*sic*] the level of Non-Europeans and the questions arising therefrom are national and should be met by the Government out of taxation of those citizens, with the ability to pay, and urges the Government, as representing the Union to shoulder its supreme obligations in this direction.<sup>78</sup>

The City Council of Pietermaritzburg expressed similar sentiments:

The Corporation does not acknowledge any responsibility for the relief of unemployment or distress, being of the opinion that these are national matters.<sup>79</sup>

Even *Ilanga lase Natal* concurred with such sentiments:

We are not in a position to know the various causes that have made so many people, Europeans as well as Natives to be in need of employment, but this we know that it is the burden of the Government to bring to work all its machinery to ease the position of such as are unemployed if they are employable, whether Europeans or Natives.<sup>80</sup>

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77. The government established a Committee to investigate the unemployment situation in the Union, which reported in 1932. The Committee made a number of recommendations, such as the establishment of a special £5 000 000 fund for the establishment of State relief works and the co-ordination and implementation of the normal Public Works programme (which the government had curtailed as an economy measure), neither of which was ever implemented. The government did, however, implement recommendations on the extension of existing relief works. See Union of South Africa, *Report of the Unemployment Investigation Committee*, U.G. 30 of 1932.
78. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Durban Town Council, 12 August 1932.
79. NAD, 3/PMB, Report of the Sub-Committee appointed to interview the Provincial Executive on the Administration of Poor Relief, City Council Minutes, 8 December 1931.
80. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 6 March 1931.

The Union government paid little heed to such articles and resolutions. No "alphabet soup" of government agencies was established to deal with the problem, as was done in the United States, nor did the government ever contemplate making cash payments to the unemployed. The Union did not institute an Unemployment Insurance or "dole" system until 1937, long after the depression had passed.<sup>81</sup> The government clearly saw its role in the urban areas as being largely confined to the subsidisation by the Department of Labour of relief works begun by provincial administrations, municipalities, divisional councils and para-statal organisations like the South African Railways.

In granting such subsidies account was taken of the extent to which the applying authority implemented the "civilised labour" policy, its financial resources and the level of unemployment prevalent in the area.<sup>82</sup> The Department also distinguished, for subsidy purposes, between those workers employed in a permanent capacity and those employed on relief works, which were viewed as temporary. For white workers taken into full municipal employ the subsidy was granted for a period of three years; 50 per cent for the first year, 30 per cent for the second year and 20 per cent for the third year. These subsidies were intended to bridge the gap between the wages paid to unskilled blacks and a minimum wage of 6s per day for unskilled whites. This applied only to fit men. Where the municipalities chose to employ semi-fit men on a permanent basis, the subsidy was 20 per cent on a minimum wage of 5s per day.<sup>83</sup>

In respect of those fit men employed on relief works, the subsidy was 50 per cent of the difference between black and "civilised labour" on a minimum daily wage of 6s.<sup>84</sup> In respect of semi-fit men employed on relief works, the subsidy would only amount to 25 per cent of the difference, provided that the relevant provincial administration also contributed 25 per cent. The municipality would therefore still have to contribute the major portion of the costs.<sup>85</sup> The absorption of unemployed

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81. Davies, *Capital*, p. 90 (note 27) and pp. 316 - 317.

82. Union of South Africa, *Annual Report of the Department of Labour*, U.G. 37 of 1933, p. 7.

83. Ravenscroft, "Depression", p. 49. Note: The 6s daily minimum wage applied only to the major urban centres.

84. *Ibid.*

85. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

whites into full municipal service was not popular with municipalities, who were reluctant to commit themselves to the extra expense.<sup>86</sup> There were, however, other considerations in Natal:

That in regard to the question of the absorption of white unskilled labour into the Corporation service, the Town Council is of opinion that in the peculiar conditions of Durban where the Indian and Native population so greatly outnumbers the white population, the Town Council must study the interests of Indians and Natives as well as the European population. For that reason work carried out in the Durban area must be carried out on the economic basis, i.e. affording fair employment of Indian and Native labour. The Council is therefore of opinion that any work started to relieve the present abnormal conditions should be in the nature of temporary relief works and not designed for the permanent absorption of white unskilled labour into Corporation Works.<sup>87</sup>

As has been demonstrated, the government's conservative economic policy dictated that in times of depression when revenue accruing to the state declined, rigid economy should be practised and expenditure trimmed to the bone. A variety of economy measures were instituted to balance the budget. Unfortunately, one area in which expenditure was reduced was that which ought, by rights, to have received increased funding, the agency which was dispensing assistance to the urban unemployed, the Department of Labour. As the following table clearly illustrates, the government actually allocated a smaller proportion of the national budget to the Department of Labour during the depression years, when the calls upon it for assistance were far greater than in previous years of normal employment.

**Table 8.2**  
**Union Government and Department of Labour Budgets,**  
**1926/27 to 1934/35, in £.**

Year	Union Government Budget	Dept. Of Labour Vote	Percentage
1926/27	27 772 012	279 952	1.0080364
1927/28	28 623 842	289 138	1.0101299
1928/29	29 199 482	256 802	0.8794745
1929/30	30 534 156	275 990	0.9038730
1930/31	31 026 163	221 996	0.7154155
1931/32	29 498 089	173 139	0.5869498
1932/33	27 819 961	217 110	0.7804108
1933/34	34 676 996	246 045	0.7095337
1934/35	36 357 066	643 656	1.7703738

**Source:** Annual Reports of the Auditor-General for relevant years.

This situation may be explained partially by the conservative budgetary policies of the government, and partially by the very heavy calls which other government policies, aimed at keeping farmers on the land in a time of low producer prices and drought, made on the treasury. Government spending on export subsidies to primary producers also consumed millions of pounds.<sup>88</sup> As illustrated above,<sup>89</sup> the government had found it expedient to assist those who had brought it to power, a not impolitic move at a time when many elected governments were under considerable threat.<sup>90</sup> Government assistance to the rural areas had clearly been made a priority.<sup>91</sup> However, the Department of Labour itself did not make use of all the money it had been allocated, but in line with government fiscal policy, surrendered large surpluses during the depression years, as table 8.3 illustrates:

**Table 8.3**  
**Amounts Allocated and Expended by the Department of Labour,**  
**With Surpluses surrendered in £, 1926/27 - 1934/35**

Year	Budget Vote	Actual Expenditure	Surplus
1926/27	279 952	252 439/00/02	27 512/19/10
1927/28	289 138	278 545/11/10	10 592/08/02
1928/29	256 802	244 997/06/06	11 804/13/06
1929/30	275 990	232 469/07/01	43 520/12/11
1930/31	221 966	193 440/14/11	28 525/05/01
1931/32	173 139	138 523/18/00	34 615/02/00
1932/33	217 110	201 539/18/05	15 570/01/07
1933/34	246 045	245 891/06/08	153/13/04
1934/35	643 656	587 359/11/07	56 296/08/05

**Source: Annual Reports of the Auditor-General for relevant years.**

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86. Union of South Africa, *Report of the Department of Labour* 1933, p. 7.

87. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Town Council, 21 September 1931.

88. For a full discussion of the costs involved in the government's agricultural support programme, see Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", pp. 237 - 244.

89. See above p. 252 - 255.

90. The depression appears to have been responsible for the creation of a number of coalition governments or "Best Man Ministries" around the world. Other governments were simply turned out by voters. This will be dealt with in Chapter Nine.

91. This view is shared by Minnaar, "South African White Agriculture", p. 269.



Those in management positions at the Department of Labour appear to have followed the lead of their parsimonious political masters, for in addition to not expending their full budget, the amount the Department actually spent on relieving unemployment was also substantially smaller during the years of the depression, as table 8.4 illustrates:

**Table 8.4**  
**Expenditure by the Department of Labour on Unemployment**  
**Relief, showing percentages of the Total Budget in £,**  
**for the period 1926/27 - 1934/35**

Year	Total Expenditure	Unemployment Expenditure	Percentage
1926/27	252 439/00/02	170 981/00/00	67,73
1927/28	278 545/11/10	196 163/00/00	70,42
1928/29	244 997/06/06	162 391/00/00	66,28
1929/30	232 469/07/01	148 979/19/02	64,09
1930/31	193 440/14/11	108 875/08/05	56,28
1931/32	138 523/18/00	53 306/14/05	38,48
1932/33	201 539/18/05	127 590/05/04	63,31
1933/34	245 891/06/08	162 699/14/06	66,17
1934/35	587 359/11/07	497 138/15/07	84,64

**Source: Annual Reports of the Auditor-General for relevant years.**

Despite these budgetary constraints, the Department of Labour did make it possible for additional (mostly white) workers to be employed in the public sector by the granting of loans to employing authorities, which might otherwise not have been able to initiate or maintain relief works. Some £117 506 was thus loaned in 1933, with £69 756 going to municipalities.<sup>92</sup> Even this was not as important, however, as the subsidisation of relief workers in the pay of a wide variety of employers, mostly in the public sector.

Before discussing the operation of relief works, it is necessary to understand the official attitude towards them. Relief works were not seen as charity:

We consider that public relief, being intended to relieve distress only among the able-bodied, should take the form of

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92. Union of South Africa, *Annual Report of the Department of Labour*, U.G. 37 of 1933, p. 7.

relief works, conducted strictly on the principle that assistance is only given in return for work done. Relief works should not be a method of dispensing charity. They should simply be the means by which the Government enables a number of people to make a living by hard work, when owing to sudden circumstances, over which they have no control, they cannot get work and are in danger of starving.<sup>93</sup>

Relief works were to be of a temporary nature; virtually no one wanted to create a class of workers forever dependent on the state:

Conditions of employment on relief works should be distinctly less advantageous than those normally obtainable in ordinary unskilled employment. It is clearly undesirable that the State should be forced to maintain relief works longer than is really necessary, and workers on them should be encouraged to leave as soon as work can be got elsewhere.<sup>94</sup>

In both Durban<sup>95</sup> and Pietermaritzburg,<sup>96</sup> relief works had been in operation ever since the First World War. On the advent of the Great Depression, therefore, the existing works were simply extended and expanded. In Durban, the Corporation had already borne the greater part of the costs involved in maintaining relief works, which from 1921 to 1928/29 alone had cost £272 443, of which the council had been responsible for 79,67 per cent.<sup>97</sup> The burden of payment ultimately fell upon the ratepayers. While wishing to assist distressed fellow citizens, the council was wary of overgenerosity in the provision of relief works, not only to spare the ratepayers, but also to avert the danger of attracting the unemployed from other areas.<sup>98</sup>

It was primarily for this reason that very little was done to extend the existing relief works until the third quarter of 1931, when the number of men accommodated rose

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93. Union of South Africa, *Report of the Unemployment Investigation Committee*, U.G. 30 of 1932, p. 17. As is stated in this Report, a distinction was drawn between Poor Relief - the charity in the form of food rations dispensed by magistrates to indigents - and relief works.

94. *Ibid.*

95. See Edley, "Population", pp. 68 - 69.

96. Owen, "White Unemployment".

97. *Natal Mercury*, 28 August 1931 and Edley, "Population", p. 69.

98. Mayor's Minute 1928, p. 5.

from 140 to 490.<sup>99</sup> Another reason, already alluded to, was the council's conviction that responsibility for dealing with the problem lay with the central government.<sup>100</sup> A further cause of delay was that the council was expecting the road works begun by the provincial council to absorb the majority of the unemployed of the town. At a meeting of the Council-in-Committee in early 1930:

[Mr Tobias, the Divisional Inspector of Labour for Natal] intimated that road work would soon be offering in Natal, in the construction of roads (a) from Port Shepstone to Prince Alfred; (b) from Ladysmith to the National Park and (c) from Muden to Greytown...it was the wish of the Government to recruit these men as far as possible from the fit men on existing relief works...He could not say definitely but it was to be inferred, that Government would not view sympathetically the granting of subsidies for the employment on Municipal relief works of physically fit men.<sup>101</sup>

As a direct consequence of this meeting, it was decided not to increase the number of workers on the council's relief works "...until such time as all the unemployed in Durban have been absorbed in the Government road works".<sup>102</sup>

The government was apparently still unsure of its policy, but it was suggested that employment on relief works in the urban areas should be restricted to semi-fit men.<sup>103</sup> This was rejected by the council, acting on the advice of the Borough Engineer, who stated that relief works would not be able to function with semi-fit men alone.<sup>104</sup> Of the council's 140 relief workers, 100 were employed on a daily basis for road works, quarrying and land reclamation, and were paid a daily wage of 8s per man. The remainder were older and semi-fit, 10 being employed on land reclamation at the Eastern Vlei, while another 30 were employed in the parks, gardens, cemeteries and on the beaches. These men received a daily wage of 6s per day.<sup>105</sup>

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99. Mayor's Minute 1931, p. 18.

100. See above, p. 268.

101. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 7 January 1930.

102. *Ibid.*

103. The interview with the council was followed by a letter from Tobias to the Council in which he expressed exactly these sentiments. NAD, 3/DBN, Letter from Tobias to Council, 20 February 1930, included in Minutes of Council, 7 March 1930.

Meanwhile the unemployment situation in the town was growing worse and the council received a number of requests from the public, in the form of deputations and letters, for more to be done for the unemployed.<sup>106</sup> At a meeting of the Unemployment Sub-Committee in October 1930, it was decided to create positions on the relief works for an additional 800 men in the following few months.<sup>107</sup> When the full council met, however, this was deemed to be too ambitious and the number was reduced to 250, provided that a subsidy could be obtained from the Department of Labour. Even with the subsidy, this would cost the council an extra £29 594, if administration and costs of equipment were included.<sup>108</sup> Despite the proposal being approved, it was not until February 1931 that the scheme came into operation.<sup>109</sup>

Unemployment among Durban's small "coloured" community resulted in the council instituting relief works for 30 of these men in June 1931. It is a measure of the seriousness of the situation that the Borough Engineer was authorised to engage the men even before the Department of Labour had been approached for the requisite subsidy. The men were to be paid a daily wage of 4s 6d.<sup>110</sup>

The total cost of relief works mounted by the council in 1930/31 amounted to some £30 666 16s 11d, of which the council paid £25 307 16s 5d, by far the largest portion of the costs.<sup>111</sup>

In July 1931, Councillor Mrs Edith Benson suggested that 100 white relief workers be permanently employed by the council in place of 200 African and Indian

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104. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 7 March 1930.

105. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 5 April 1930.

106. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 24 October 1930.

107. *Natal Mercury*, 1 November 1930.

108. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 6 November 1930.

109. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 27 February 1931.

110. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 5 June 1931.

111. Mayor's Minute 1931, p. xx.

employees, who were then engaged in the construction of footpaths. Mrs Benson argued that this would involve extra expenditure of only 4s 6d per man per day, as the African and Indian workers were receiving 3s per man per day.<sup>112</sup> This was adopted on an experimental basis, with 34 whites replacing Indians and Africans.<sup>113</sup> The council was under constant pressure from the government to absorb more white relief workers into full municipal employ, and Mrs Benson's scheme marked the beginning of the breakdown of council resolve that this should not happen.<sup>114</sup> In April 1932, a further 100 white relief workers were taken into full municipal service.<sup>115</sup>

By November 1931, there were 600 men employed on relief works in the town.<sup>116</sup> However, as the ranks of the unemployed were growing daily, the Secretary of the Department of Labour, Mr Ivan Walker, visited the town to propose that new relief works be set up to employ an additional 600 men. The situation in Durban was considered to be so grave that the Union government was prepared, through the Department of Labour, to subsidise the scheme to the extent of 3s per man per day, on a daily wage of 6s per man, for a five-day working week.<sup>117</sup> While accepting the dire necessity of the scheme, the council thought the wages proposed by the Department were too low and the Town Treasurer was asked to work out the extra costs involved in bringing the wage up to 7s 6d per man per day.<sup>118</sup> The issue was resolved by an agreement that the men would be paid on a staggered scale; 6s for the first two months, 7s for the following two months and, finally, 8s per man per day, following a further two months' satisfactory service. At the same time, the wages of "coloured" relief workers were also increased to 6s per man per day.<sup>119</sup>

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112. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 31 July 1931. There was obviously something wrong with the councillor's arithmetic.

113. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 21 September 1931. It was decided that the African and Indian workers so displaced were not to be dismissed, but transferred.

114. See above p. 269 - 272.

115. Mayor's Minute 1932, p. xx.

116. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 5 November 1931.

117. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Town Council, 20 June 1932.

118. *Ibid.*

119. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Town Council, 8 July 1932.

Municipal relief works in Durban cost a total of £52 642 8s 8d in the municipal year 1931/32, of which the NPA and the government (through the Department of Labour) together contributed only £9 860 12s 2d, leaving the lion's share of £42 781 16s 6d to be paid by the Durban Town Council. Appeals to the government to increase its contribution towards the costs involved in the maintenance of relief works were refused "on financial grounds". Instead, the Department of Labour suggested that an additional 200 semi-fit men be employed on relief works, for which the Department would be prepared to contribute 2s 6d of the proposed wage of 5s per man per day. This offer was accepted after the council had again debated the low wage offered.<sup>120</sup>

After representations from the Indian community about the high level of unemployment and the effects of the discriminatory "civilised labour" policy, the Town Council agreed to begin relief works for Indians. Initially, a scheme which would have provided employment for only 100 men "in recognised Indian areas" was mooted but, after debate, it was decided to increase this number substantially, to 300.<sup>121</sup> The Department of Labour was prepared to contribute half the daily cost of 3s per man.<sup>122</sup> By the end of the municipal year 1932/33 therefore, there were 1 400 relief workers in Durban:

Old Section	315
New Section - Whites	484
New Section - Coloureds	80
Semi-fit (Stone breakers)	30
Permanent European Labourers	195
Indian Relief Workers	296
<b>Total</b>	<b>1 400</b> <sup>123</sup>

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120. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 15 September 1932.

121. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 12 January 1933.

122. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 24 January 1933.

123 "Old Section" refers to those workers employed prior to June 1932 and those employed subsequently in their places. "New Section" refers to those workers employed after 1 June 1932, under the amended conditions. Mayor's Minute 1933, p. 4.

Relief works cost £117 205 in the municipal year 1932/33, to which the Town Council contributed £82 445, while the NPA and the government contributed the remaining £34 760.<sup>124</sup>

During the municipal year 1933/34, the number of men employed on relief works declined somewhat as conditions in the town began to improve. The situation had not yet improved to the extent that relief works could be abolished, but no new works were begun and workers were encouraged to seek alternative employment. In the case of Indian relief workers, this "encouragement" took the form of a reduction of their daily wage by 6d per day, leaving them with only 2s 6d per man.<sup>125</sup> The number of workers employed was:

Old Section	254
New Section - Whites	372
New Section - Coloureds	72
Semi-fit (Stone breakers)	27
Permanent European Labourers	201
Indian relief workers	270
<b>Total</b>	<b>1 196</b> <sup>126</sup>

The total cost of relief works in the town for this municipal year was £102 386 14s 6d, of which sum the council contributed £73 699 7s 10d, while the NPA and the government paid in the remaining £28 687 6s 8d.<sup>127</sup>

Overall, it is obvious that the Durban Town Council, through its ratepayers, had been obliged to bear the greater portion of the costs involved in initiating and maintaining relief works for the unemployed in the urban area. This analysis lends credence to the argument that the government left the major burden of the provision of unemployment relief in the urban areas to the local authorities. This involved the major urban centre of Natal in considerable expense, as the total

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124. Mayor's Minute 1933, p. xxiv.  
 125. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 3 January 1934.  
 126. Mayor's Minute 1934, p. xxv.  
 127. *Ibid.*

contribution of the Durban Town Council in the period 1929/30 to 1933/34 was the astronomical sum of £236 530 out of a total cost of £318 755, or 74 per cent of the total cost, as table 8.5 illustrates:

**Table 8.5**  
**Costs of Relief Works in Durban, showing portion contributed**  
**by the Town Council in cash, to the nearest £ and expressed as a percentage,**  
**1929/30 to 1933/34**

Year	Total Cost	Cost to Council	Percentage
1929/30	15 854	12 297	78
1930/31	30 667	25 308	83
1931/32	52 643	42 782	81
1932/33	117 205	82 445	70
1933/34	102 387	73 698	72
<b>Total</b>	<b>318 756</b>	<b>236 530</b>	<b>74</b>

**Source:** Adapted from Edley, "Population", p. 78.

This largely unforeseen expenditure plunged the Council into deficit at a time when the financial situation of the borough dictated moderation. In common with most local authorities, Durban was expecting a decline in revenue as the depression grew worse. Furthermore, the town was not willing to incur massive expenditure, as it already had substantial accumulated debts in the form of outstanding loans of some £394 947 as early as 1927.<sup>128</sup> The situation, however, made it imperative that the burgesses of the town should be assisted through relief works as so little else was being done for the unemployed. The cost to the town was proportionately more than even the government was spending, as the following table illustrates:

**Table 8.6**  
**Annual Budget of Durban Town Council, Showing Income,**  
**Expenditure, Amount Spent on Relief Works and percentage of Total Budget**  
**spent on relief works, 1929/30-1933/34**  
**(to the nearest £)**

Year	Income	Expenditure	Balance	Relief Works	per cent
1929/30	3 326 702	2 881 067	+ 445 635	12 297	0,43
1930/31	2 705 778	2 684 829	+ 20 949	25 308	0,94
1931/32	2 529 154	2 542 770	- 13 616	42 782	1,68
1932/33	2 711 910	2 780 035	- 68 125	82 445	2,97
1933/34	2 627 173	2 613 091	+ 14 082	73 698	2,82

**Source:** *Natal Mercury*, 28 August 1931 and Mayor's Minutes for relevant years.



The Town Council did, therefore, have a legitimate complaint against the government, for the council was spending proportionately more of its budget on the relief of unemployment than the government was spending on the Department of Labour, which was the chief dispensing agent of relief in the urban areas, for all years except 1929/30.<sup>129</sup> It is little wonder then, that despite the high levels of unemployment prevalent in the town, the council was extremely reluctant to spend more than was absolutely necessary. Only legitimate residents of the town could be assisted and, consequently, a three-year residential qualification for employment on the relief works was imposed.<sup>130</sup>

While relief works were instituted for white, "coloured" and Indian unemployed in the borough, no relief works were ever contemplated for the African unemployed of Durban. All that appears to have been done was to supply free accommodation and meals to starving Africans. In the period 24 October 1931 to 23 February 1932, this cost the council the comparatively paltry sum of £144 16s 0d. In January 1932, it was decided that Africans who wished to make use of this scheme would be set to work weeding compound grounds, and would be given one meal for every bag of weeds collected. Despite objections from the Municipal Auditor, Mr A Graham-Cook, it was decided to continue this scheme.<sup>131</sup> Reports were published in the *Natal Mercury*<sup>132</sup> and in the *Natal Advertiser*,<sup>133</sup> that starving Africans in Durban were receiving assistance from the Natal Workers' Club, but when this was investigated, the reports were deemed to have been exaggerated:

I am satisfied that although there is undoubtedly a great deal of unemployment amongst Natives in Durban, there is comparatively very little actual starvation. This may be

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128. See Town Treasurer's Report in Mayor's Minute 1927, p. xiii.

129. See Table 8.2 above.

130. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Works Committee, 28 September 1931.

131. *Natal Mercury*, 9 March 1932.

132. *Natal Mercury*, 11 August 1932.

133. *Natal Advertiser*, 11 August 1932.

accounted for by the fact that it is seldom that any native who is in a position to help another will refuse to do so, especially in regards to food.<sup>134</sup>

The council appears to have done almost nothing for unemployed women, but the high level of juvenile unemployment prevalent in the town did prompt the council to appoint a special sub-committee to investigate possible avenues of assistance.<sup>135</sup> This sub-committee reported that it was possible for the council to absorb some 51 white youths into municipal employ if 27 Indian workers were displaced.<sup>136</sup> The full council approved the permanent employment of these youths, on condition that Indian workers be not dismissed but transferred. No juveniles were to be employed until such time as the Indian workers had been transferred satisfactorily.<sup>137</sup>

In Pietermaritzburg, the City Council had also had to reach deep into its pockets to provide relief works for its citizens after the First World War, relief works having been initiated in May 1922. Relief provided by the City Council up to July 1923 had cost £5 600.<sup>138</sup> By 1928, the council, through the Works Committee, was spending approximately £2 500 a year on employing approximately 35 white relief workers.<sup>139</sup> In 1928 these 35 men were being employed as follows:

Race Course Ironstone Quarry	12
Parks Department	8
Road Patching Gang	3
Trimming Street Trees	3
Electricity Department	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>

The costs to the council amounted to £1 158 8s 5d in this year.<sup>140</sup> Even before the onset of the depression, the number of relief workers had been increased from 20 to

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134. NAD, CNC PMB, Vol. 13A, File N7/8/2, Native Commissioner, Durban to CNC, PMB, 8 October 1932. The Native Commissioner in Durban further pointed out that the Natal Workers' Club was an ICU controlled body and when he had interviewed the Secretary, the latter had been quite unable to furnish particulars.
135. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 30 October 1931.
136. The other positions would be specially created.
137. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 22 April 1932.
138. City of Pietermaritzburg, *Corporation Year Book*, 1923, p. 19.
139. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Finance and General Purposes Committee, 27 September 1928.

35 men, although the government only subsidised the original 20. The state of unemployment in the city may be gauged from the fact that a total of 420 applications for places on relief works had been made by 31 July 1929, but only 35 men were employed, while 30 more were on the waiting list.<sup>141</sup> The cost to the council in this municipal year was £1 041 19s 7d.<sup>142</sup>

Unemployment in Pietermaritzburg seemed almost to be part of the permanent state of affairs in the city. Owen remarked that:

The problem of unemployment in Pietermaritzburg fluctuated, indeed, it was becoming something that the corporation had realised it had to live with; no sooner did it seem as though the situation was on the decline than it worsened again. This was possibly because the authorities were treating the symptoms and not the cause.<sup>143</sup>

Thus by the time the depression reached Pietermaritzburg, many on the council were becoming concerned that relief works were assuming a permanent character:

The provision of relief works was merely the provision of temporary employment until the men could find something more substantial. It was never intended that the works become permanent or that the men became permanent employees of the council; yet, some had settled down permanently and seemed to want nothing better.<sup>144</sup>

It seems that although relief for unemployed whites had begun before the "civilised labour" policy was promulgated, a change of attitude had come about by the time of the depression. Some councillors no longer perceived the employment of whites on relief works as a form of assistance, but rather as an obligation to implement government policy. By accepting the government subsidy they were paying uneconomic wages to white labourers

140. City of Pietermaritzburg, City Treasurer's Report, *Corporation Year Book*, 1928, p. 26.

141. See City of Pietermaritzburg, City Engineer's Report, *Corporation Year Book*, 1929.

142. City of Pietermaritzburg, Report of the City Treasurer, *Corporation Year Book*, 1929, p. 26.

143. Owen, "White Unemployment", p. 24.

144. Councillor Cross in an interview with the *Natal Witness*, 15 January 1930.

...of from 7s 6d. a day in order to further the government's white labour policy. They were doing so because the government paid half. Otherwise they would do better to employ Native labour.<sup>145</sup>

Like their counterparts in Durban, the City Council resisted attempts to force it to absorb more whites into corporation service in a permanent capacity. In May 1930 there were only 31 relief workers in the city. At this stage the Department of Labour encouraged the council to open positions on relief works to semi-fit men, equal in number to the number of fit men employed, and indicated willingness to contribute 20 per cent of their wages, if the provincial council could be persuaded to do likewise.<sup>146</sup> At the end of the municipal year, however, only 21 men were employed, while a further 39 were on the waiting list. Some 448 men had applied for places on the relief works in the course of the year.<sup>147</sup> The cost of maintaining relief works was, however, rising. The works cost the council £1 552 17s 10d in the year ended 31 July 1930.<sup>148</sup>

In the municipal year ended 31 July 1931, the state of unemployment in the city had clearly grown worse, as 506 men had applied for places on the relief works, but only 44 could be accommodated, while 51 were on the waiting list. The council paid some £1 616 17s 1d towards the costs of maintaining the relief works.<sup>149</sup> In December 1931, there were only 22 men employed on relief works in the city and their tenure was decidedly insecure, as the subsidy agreement between the City Council and the Department of Labour was due to terminate on 31 January 1932. There was little likelihood of the subsidy being renewed unless the council were prepared to employ "...a certain number of Civilised workers in place of Uncivilised workers."<sup>150</sup> The Relief Works Sub-Committee had earlier stated the council's position:

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145. *Ibid.*

146. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 22 May 1930.

147. City of Pietermaritzburg, Borough Engineer's Report, *Corporation Year Book*, 1930.

148. City of Pietermaritzburg, City Treasurer's Report, *Corporation Year Book*, 1930, p. 26.

149. City of Pietermaritzburg, City Treasurer's Report, *Corporation Year Book*, 1931, p. 28.

150. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Works Committee, 23 December 1931.

...the Borough is doing everything in its power to ensure permanent employment, but if the subsidy is withdrawn, the position would be reviewed and the works closed down.<sup>151</sup>

This stance was maintained throughout the depression years and even at the height of the crisis in June 1932, a special sub-committee, appointed to consider an expansion of relief works, had as the first item of their recommendations:

That the policy of not displacing local Native labourers in providing work for civilised labourers be adopted.<sup>152</sup>

Reporting on the Unemployment Conference which the Minister of Labour had called in Pretoria, the Mayor reiterated the council's viewpoint:

While the major recommendation of the Conference — viz., that Municipalities should absorb a proportion of unskilled White Labour in Municipal service under a reducing subsidy — was not acceptable to this Council, other Municipalities have adopted it...<sup>153</sup>

In presenting his budget estimates for 1933/34, Councillor Mr A E Harwin said:

The question of unemployment has assumed formidable dimensions, and although its daily impact has been somewhat relieved by the altogether praiseworthy and useful scheme initiated and brought into operation through the efforts of His Worship the Mayor, there still remains unsettled the whole policy of the Council with regard to the permanent employment of white labour, and apart from our undoubted obligations to our Non-European people, how it can be provided for within the limits of our modest resources.<sup>154</sup>

The Pietermaritzburg council seems to have been more resolute on this position as no evidence can be found that any relief workers were appointed to the council's permanent employ during the depression years.

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151. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Relief Works Sub-Committee, 27 May 1929.

152. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 30 June 1932.

153. City of Pietermaritzburg, Mayor's Minute, *Corporation Year Book*, 1932.

154. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 26 September 1933.

This stance was maintained even when the Secretary of Labour, Mr Walker, visited the city. The council did, however, decide to bring onto the relief works an extra 100 men, who would work a five-day week and receive a daily wage of between 4s 6d and 6s, depending on their tasks. A sum of £10 000 was set aside for Relief Capital Works for the following year. A scheme was established whereby the council gave preferential treatment to applications for employment on relief works of men who were receiving assistance from the Pietermaritzburg Benevolent Society (PBS), thus affording such men the opportunity to earn up to 27s per week, instead of the 5s which the PBS was able to give each case. The council grant to the PBS was proportionately reduced.<sup>155</sup> At the end of July 1932, however, there were still only 111 men on relief works in the city,<sup>156</sup> while 635 men had applied for places on those works during the year.<sup>157</sup> Relief works in the city cost the council some £1 725 15s 1d, while the government contributed £443 15s 4d and the NPA £329 5s 7d. In addition, £334 had been raised by selling ironstone which had been quarried and broken by relief workers.<sup>158</sup>

By 1933, the situation in the city was critical, and 187 men were employed on relief works at the end of July in that year. Representations regarding the high levels of unemployment prevalent among members of the Indian community had resulted in 50 Indians being given places on the relief works.<sup>159</sup> The Department of Labour paid a subsidy of 1s 6d per man per day in respect of these workers.<sup>160</sup> A similar representation was made in regard to the position of "coloured" unemployed in the city. The Divisional Inspector of Labour, Mr Tobias, wrote to the council

...stating that it had been represented that the assistance at present afforded the Coloured unemployed in Pietermaritzburg by the Council was insufficient to meet the increasing number of Coloured unemployed and consequent distress<sup>161</sup>

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155. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 26 April 1932.

156. City of Pietermaritzburg, Mayor's Minute, *Corporation Year Book*, 1932.

157. City of Pietermaritzburg, Report of the City Engineer, *Corporation Year Book*, 1932.

158. City of Pietermaritzburg, Report of the City Treasurer, *Corporation Year Book*, 1932, p. 28.

159. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 11 April 1933.

160. City of Pietermaritzburg, Mayor's Minute, *Corporation Year Book*, 1933.

161. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Works Committee, 7 February 1933.

Tobias offered a subsidy, which was accepted. The men employed on relief works were deployed as follows:

Roadworks (Europeans)	63
Roadworks (Coloureds)	11
Ironstone Quarry (Europeans)	14
Ironstone Quarry (Coloureds)	29
Parks (Europeans)	11
Electricity Dept (Europeans)	9
Indian Relief workers	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>187</b>

Costs had also escalated dramatically and amounted to some £5 763 5s 7d, of which the council had to pay £3 364 18s 8d, the remaining £2 398 6s 11d being contributed by the government and the NPA.<sup>162</sup> The charitable organisation, Toc H, had approached the council with a request that something be done about the high level of juvenile unemployment in the city. The council had agreed to employ some 24 youths at £2 per month, on condition that the council would pay only 10s to every £1 raised by Toc H towards the youths' wages.<sup>163</sup> The council was perturbed at the number of unemployed in the city, and proposed that in order to distribute relief evenly, no man would be able to work on the relief works on a continuous basis. Relief workers were only allowed to work one week in the month, although this was extended to two weeks in the month in February 1933.<sup>164</sup>

By 1934, the numbers employed on relief works had declined only marginally, to 153, but the costs had escalated dramatically, to £8 586 7s 11d, of which sum the council had contributed £5 550 16s 7d, the remainder coming from the government and NPA.<sup>165</sup> In 1935, the council was still running relief works for its burgesses and the number in employment had actually increased to 159 as at the end of July 1935,<sup>166</sup> but the total costs had decreased to only £6 569 5s 4d, to which sum the council contributed £3 936 17s 10d.<sup>167</sup>

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162. City of Pietermaritzburg, City Treasurer's Report, *Corporation Year Book* 1933, p. 32.

163. City of Pietermaritzburg, Mayor's Minute, *Corporation Year Book*, 1933.

164. *Natal Witness*, 10 February 1933.

165. City of Pietermaritzburg, City Treasurer's Report, *Corporation Year Book*, 1934, p. 36.

166. City of Pietermaritzburg, Mayor's Minute, *Corporation Year Book*, 1935.

In contrast to the situation in Durban, unemployment does not appear to have ceased with the general recovery in business confidence which followed the Union's departure from the gold standard at the end of 1932. Rather, it seems that the council had grown accustomed to providing relief work for its needy citizens and may have continued to do so because of the lack of alternative employment available to residents of Pietermaritzburg, even long after the depression had passed.

Unfortunately, no figures relating to the contributions of the government and the NPA to relief works in the town are available for the early years of the depression, so no comparative study of these can be attempted. It is worth noting, however, that between 1927/28 and 1934/35, relief works in the city cost the council approximately £19 948, which, for a city the size of Pietermaritzburg, was considerable.

In the town of Estcourt, the town council decided to institute relief works in December 1932,<sup>168</sup> after representations had been received from the unemployed of the town.<sup>169</sup> The decision came after the council had tried to provide temporary relief through engaging some white labourers to assist the Town Foreman in carrying out temporary works in July 1932. This assistance was limited to *bona fide* burgesses, or persons who had been resident in the town for at least eight months.<sup>170</sup> A decision was also taken to use only white labour in building operations in the local African location.<sup>171</sup> These temporary measures had not served to alleviate the distress caused by the unemployment prevalent in this community and as a result, full relief works were instituted.

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167. City of Pietermaritzburg, City Treasurer's Report, *Corporation Year Book*, 1935, p. 36.

168. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 29 November 1932.

169. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 19 July 1932. The proceedings of the council had twice been disrupted by the unemployed in June 1931, but the council had declined to act at that point. See NAD, 3/EST, 23 June 1931.

170. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 19 July 1932.

171. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Town Council, 20 September 1932.



A sub-committee, appointed to investigate the whole matter of relief works,<sup>172</sup> reiterated the necessity for such works in the following terms:

...investigation of the question of unemployment has shewn that there are an appreciable number of men, mostly with families dependent upon them, who have been out of employment for some time and for whom there appears no prospect whatever of any work being found for many a day to come.<sup>173</sup>

A sum of £100 was to be set aside to fund the relief works, which consisted of stone-breaking in the municipal quarry. Some relief was also to be afforded to the small "coloured" community of the town, although at lower rates of pay:

A further point which fell to be determined was whether Coloured persons (of the type ordinarily regarded as ratepayers when residing in the Towns) should not also be accorded relief work...it was agreed that it would be a definite hardship to exclude this class, who are known to be in dire need, though it has been recognised that they must necessarily come in at a lower scale of relief pay so as to conform with the relative standard of living ordinarily subsisting between Europeans and Non-Europeans under normal working conditions.<sup>174</sup>

A total of sixteen whites and six "coloureds" were regarded as eligible for these relief works, but by February 1933, the £100 voted for relief works was almost exhausted<sup>175</sup> and the town was forced to apply for a state subsidy to continue the project. Work was halted in April 1933,<sup>176</sup> but the council was forced to resume operations in May 1933, after it became clear that at least seven whites and five "coloureds" were still dependent on relief works to keep body and soul together.<sup>177</sup> The council did pass a resolution

172. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 22 November 1932.

173. NAD, 3/EST, Report of Sub-Committee on Unemployment Relief, included in Minutes of Council-in-Committee, 29 November 1932.

174. *Ibid.*

175. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 7 February 1933.

176. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 18 April 1933.

177. NAD, 3/EST, Report of the Unemployment Relief Committee, 12 May 1933, included in Minutes of Town Council, 16 May 1933.

That no person who is not a rate-payer of Estcourt shall be eligible for such employment unless he shall have first deposited at the Town Office a certificate to show that he has been rejected for employment on the Provincial Relief Road Party Scheme.<sup>178</sup>

The council was attempting to limit its responsibilities in regard to the provision of relief to only those men who genuinely could not find alternative employment, and in fact refused to employ two men who did not supply such certificates.<sup>179</sup> By October, only three whites were still employed on the relief works in the town.<sup>180</sup> The Borough of Estcourt was also reluctant to take unemployed whites into its permanent service, even when the sub-committee on unemployment relief recommended this.<sup>181</sup> The exact costs to the town cannot be calculated, as stone broken by relief workers was both utilised by the council and sold to buyers at a profit.<sup>182</sup>

Another town in the province which was wrestling with unemployment was Ladysmith. In October 1931, the Ladysmith Benevolent Society approached the council with a list of the unemployed of the town and indicated that the men were prepared to work for 5s per man per day. During the subsequent investigation, the men requested permission to cut timber on council land which they could sell in the local market as firewood for £1 per load.<sup>183</sup> The council refused permission and instructed the Borough Engineer to attempt to find work for these men.<sup>184</sup> Nothing was done, however, because news was received that the provincial council was to employ at least ten men on road works. The town council resolved to approach the local member of the provincial council, Mr James Macaulay MEC, for assistance in this matter.<sup>185</sup> Nothing appears to have been done in this regard until Mr S D

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178. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Town Council, 16 May 1933.

179. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 30 May 1933.

180. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 24 October 1933

181. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Town Council, 16 May 1933.

182. NAD, 3/EST, Report of the Unemployment Relief Committee, 12 May 1933, included in Council Minutes, 16 May 1933.

183. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 22 October 1931.

184. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 22 October 1931.

Roberts, one of the Employment Officers with the Department of Labour in Durban, visited the town in January 1932. After this meeting, the Borough Engineer was instructed "...to see what could be done to employ civilised labourers in unskilled work".<sup>186</sup> Only two men were so employed in March 1932, but it is unclear whether they were employed in a permanent or temporary capacity.<sup>187</sup> A subsidy from the Department of Labour was later obtained for these men.<sup>188</sup>

Representations from unemployed Indians<sup>189</sup> led to the council offering relief works in the form of stone-breaking, but no evidence could be found to suggest that this offer was ever taken up. In September 1933, the Ladysmith Benevolent Society again approached the council about starting relief works for the twelve men permanently on their books.<sup>190</sup> The council responded, as before, by agreeing to engage the men on stone-breaking at a local quarry, but again there is no evidence to suggest that this offer was ever taken up.<sup>191</sup> The council was well aware of the unpopularity of the work they offered and may have used the stone-quarrying as a means of both salving their consciences and of deterring the unemployed from becoming a charge on the borough's revenues.

Relief works in Natal have been discussed in some detail because they were the main conduit through which government at all levels channelled assistance to the unemployed. They were far more complex than a simple "dole" system would have been. Firstly, the programmes instituted were generally necessary public works which would probably have been undertaken anyway, if not during the depression, then certainly after it. Little of the work performed was useless. However, as the relief of white unemployment was seen to be a priority, work which would normally have been done by Africans was given to whites, at a higher cost. Secondly, the

185. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 29 October 1931.

186. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of Special Council Meeting, 22 January 1932.

187. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of the Works/Health/Water Works/Lands/Abattoir Committee, 17 March 1932.

188. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of the Works, etc. Committee, 16 March 1933.

189. See above p. 244.

190. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 28 September 1933.

191. *Ibid.*

unemployed were given the opportunity to work for the assistance they received. They thus not only gained the means to support their families, but also the knowledge that their efforts were valued; they earned their wages and thus regained some sense of self-worth. Many unemployed men had a horror of accepting charity; it denoted failure, and was an admission of inadequacy which damaged self-esteem. Cries of "give us work not charity" were often heard at meetings of the unemployed.<sup>192</sup> At one meeting of the unemployed of Durban in July 1931, a speaker said: "The Benevolent Society has sent more men to hell than all the beer brewed in Africa."<sup>193</sup>

An elderly pensioner wrote in an article contributed to the *Natal Mercury*:

They [the unemployed] do not want charity nor even sympathy, especially if the charity or sympathy is patronising. They simply want work. They recognise that unemployment is a national question...<sup>194</sup>

However, there were many who saw relief works as a far from ideal solution. Many men, particularly those who had led sedentary lives, found the manual labour required on the relief works too arduous.<sup>195</sup> Others found that manual labour was "degrading" and "depressing" and likened conditions on the relief works to "slavery".<sup>196</sup> Those unemployed originating from farms, in particular, found it difficult to accept that they were being asked to perform manual labour, which they regarded as "kaffir work".<sup>197</sup> Such responses provoked angry reaction from *Ilanga lase Natal* in March 1931.<sup>198</sup> The newspaper later carried an article signed "Methodist Church Man" [*sic*] in which the writer asked, "Who has "degraded" the white man by competing with the black man? Is it not the white man himself who

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192. *Natal Mercury*, 20 September 1930, 25 October 1930, 2 July 1931, 10 August 1931.

193. *Natal Mercury*, 8 July 1931.

194. *Natal Mercury*, 16 September 1931.

195. *Natal Mercury*, 26 February 1930, 26 September 1930.

196. *Natal Witness*, 5 February 1931.

197. Mr F Botha, speaking at a meeting of the unemployed in Pietermaritzburg reported in *Natal Witness*, 10 September 1931.

198. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 6 March 1931.

sees degradation in the work of his hands?"<sup>199</sup> Artisans felt that work in their trades should be provided for them, not road works,<sup>200</sup> but neither Durban nor Pietermaritzburg ever instituted such forms of relief works.

Most disputes over relief works were concerned with pay. As A J Odendaal, a former relief worker, wrote of his experience on the provincial road scheme:

I went out under the belief that the work I was intended to do would bring me sufficient remuneration to keep my home in Maritzburg together...My faith was rudely shaken and as long as I live I will never agree to work under those conditions for the pittance of a wage I received. There is nothing but sheer slavery out there.<sup>201</sup>

This was also true of relief works in the major urban centres. In Durban, relief workers earned between 5s and 8s per man per day, while the council was paying its "European Labourers" who were not relief workers a wage of between 13s 4d and 19s 1d per man per day in 1928/29.<sup>202</sup> A relief worker would thus take home in a week what an ordinary white labourer would earn in a day.<sup>203</sup> Others complained that when the weather turned inclement and they could not work, they were not paid, while others complained that relief workers were not given precedence when permanent council positions fell vacant.<sup>204</sup>

Relief workers were in an extremely difficult position as they were engaged on a daily basis. The wages they earned were so low that they could not belong to existing municipal unions, and were not entitled to sick leave or any other benefits. In Durban, a union of relief workers was formed,<sup>205</sup> but on all relief work schemes, throughout the province, there was always the unstated understanding that if men became troublesome or too demanding they could be readily replaced. In

199. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 12 February 1932.

200. *Natal Mercury*, 8 July 1931, 10 August 1931, 11 February 1932, 16 April 1932.

201. *Natal Witness*, 12 February 1931.

202. Borough Engineer's Report, Mayor's Minutes 1929, p. 28.

203. Edley, "Population", p. 81.

204. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Works Committee, 27 October 1931.

205. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Works Committee, 26 November 1931.

Pietermaritzburg between 1929 and 1932, some 109 men were "discharged" from the relief works.<sup>206</sup>

Furthermore, relief works only provided employment for white, "coloured" and Indian adult males resident in the urban areas. No form of relief work was ever provided for women or for Africans in urban areas. Juveniles were assisted in some urban areas, but priority was always given to adult males. Despite representations from Juvenile Affairs Boards, the school-leaving age was not raised during the depression, but many praiseworthy schemes were initiated both in Durban and elsewhere, to keep young people occupied until they could find employment. The Natal Education Department also supplied meals to school children in less affluent areas.<sup>207</sup>

Relief works were, however, not the only way of relieving distress caused by unemployment. Virtually every town had some form of charitable organisation. The major towns had many institutions and organisations designed to provide support in times of financial crisis. These organisations depended largely on the generosity of the public and on support from local government. During the depression, calls upon these organisations were naturally greatly increased, obliging them to seek alternative sources of funding. The Natal Provincial Administration, for example, made the sum of £97 265 8s 9d available to charities throughout Natal in the years 1928/29 to 1933/34.<sup>208</sup>

The demand for assistance was obviously greater in the major urban area, because of its greater concentration of population. The Durban Town Council made services and donations to the value of £177 605 available to charitable organisations in the town between 1929 and 1933.<sup>209</sup> So heavy were the demands on the largest charitable organisation in Durban, the Durban Benevolent Society (DBS), that it was forced to impose a two-year residential qualification for assistance in 1930.<sup>210</sup> This was subsequently raised to three years in 1932<sup>211</sup> and to four years in 1933.<sup>212</sup>

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206. City of Pietermaritzburg, *Annual Reports of the City Engineer, Corporation Year Books*, 1929-1932.

207. For details of this see Edley, "Population", pp. 85 - 86.

208. Province of Natal, *Annual Reports of the Provincial Auditor*, 1928/29-1933/34.

209. Mayor's Minutes for relevant years.

Some 100 232 persons were assisted by the DBS between 1928/29 and 1931/32.<sup>213</sup> Costs to the DBS between 1930 and 1933 were in the region of £94 744.<sup>214</sup> The DBS was forced to limit the amount of money given to each case, and actually reduced this by 4s 7d per case, to £1 18s 4d.<sup>215</sup> The DBS was constantly on the verge of bankruptcy and had to go cap in hand to the town council on numerous occasions.<sup>216</sup> While the DBS did not assist single men, it did not restrict its activities to whites, but also assisted the distressed in the small "coloured" community. Assistance to the latter families consumed 21 per cent of the budget in 1932.<sup>217</sup> By August 1932, the DBS was forced to close its doors to new cases as its resources were not equal to meeting the needs of the estimated 90 new cases applying for assistance each day.<sup>218</sup>

The DBS was not the only charitable institution in the town, but a detailed discussion of all is not possible. Mention must, however, be made of the Durban Men's Home, which mainly provided assistance to single men. This institution assisted some 1 324 men in 1929/30,<sup>219</sup> but its most valuable contribution took the form of a soup kitchen, the response to which clearly illustrated the increasing poverty prevalent in the town. In 1931 some 34 234 free meals were supplied,<sup>220</sup> which figure rose to 48 208 in 1932<sup>221</sup> and to 66 819 in 1933.<sup>222</sup>

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210. *Natal Mercury*, 17 May 1930.

211. *Natal Mercury*, 24 October 1932.

212. *Natal Mercury*, 7 April 1933.

213. *Natal Mercury*, 15 September 1932. The figure includes dependants.

214. *Natal Mercury*, 8 October 1932. The costs for 1933 were estimates.

215. *Natal Mercury*, 16 August 1930.

216. *Natal Mercury*, 13 September 1931, 4 December 1931, 7 March 1932, 23 December 1932, 1 February 1933, 6 May 1933.

217. *Natal Mercury*, 18 August 1932.

218. *Natal Mercury*, 5 November 1932.

219. *Natal Mercury*, 20 September 1930.

220. *Natal Mercury*, 9 October 1931.

221. *Natal Mercury*, 5 November 1932.

222. *Natal Mercury*, 11 November 1933. In addition 17 299 units of sleeping accommodation (free beds) were supplied. The total cost to the Home in 1933 was £5 654.

Assistance to Durban's Indian community was co-ordinated by the Indian Social Service Committee, which was headed by a Durban lawyer, Mr V Lawrence.<sup>223</sup> In 1931, when distress among the Indian community assumed serious proportions, the Indian Agent-General, Sir Kurma Reddi, initiated the formation of the Sir Kurma Reddi Unemployment Relief Committee which collected donations and distributed relief to indigent Indians.<sup>224</sup> This body also attempted to find employment for unemployed Indians,<sup>225</sup> and ran a soup kitchen which dispensed some 133 000 meals in its one-year life span, an average of 300 meals being served daily.<sup>226</sup>

Temporary assistance to destitute Africans was provided by the Durban Town Council, which ran a soup kitchen to serve those who were not termed "undesirable" or "unemployable". The manager of the location, Mr S Howard had proposed restricting the service to a maximum of 30 Africans per day, but this the council refused to accept, instructing that the service be made available to all Africans in need.<sup>227</sup>

One of the major consequences of the depression, and the very heavy calls upon charitable organisations in the town, was the formation of an umbrella body, known as the Community Chest, to co-ordinate charitable activities. This had become necessary because of widespread abuse of charity. S D Roberts, Employment Officer at the Department of Labour in Durban, outlined the problem:

... a man arrives in Durban from another Province. He hears of the good work performed by the Benevolent Society and he goes to it and receives assistance which tides him over for a week or longer. He then suddenly takes pride in the fact that he is English and off he goes to the Sons of England, who also assist him. Then he realises that his grandmother was a Scot

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223. *Natal Mercury*, 20 August 1930.

224. *Natal Mercury*, 24 September 1931.

225. *Natal Mercury*, 16 December 1932.

226. *Natal Mercury*, 18 November 1932.

227. *Natal Mercury*, 7 July 1932.



and he tackles the Caledonian Society. Then he finds that the Durban Home is a nice place and he goes there for a little time. Finally, as a last resort, he registers his name at the Employment Bureau.<sup>228</sup>

The town was also plagued with bogus street collectors, who simply pocketed the contributions of the public. Many others made a substantial living out of begging in the suburbs:

The work before the Benevolent Society is growing, but not all the demands it receives are genuine. There are professional beggars, men and women who, with ill-clad children as stock-in-trade, parade the suburbs, making appeals from door to door. Townspeople are advised to consult the Society before giving assistance. Big cabinets hold the records of most of Durban's families which are genuinely in want. The Society urges householders to make gifts to an organised charity, rather than give promiscuously.<sup>229</sup>

As a result of these types of abuses, the Community Chest was initiated on 1 January 1932, to co-ordinate charitable activities. It raised £15 000 for the first year of operations in 1932, of which the DBS received half.<sup>230</sup> The same amount was raised in 1933, but the calls upon charities, especially the DBS, made this sum inadequate and the society was forced to ask for £6 000 from the public to continue its functions.<sup>231</sup>

In Pietermaritzburg, the Pietermaritzburg Benevolent Society (PBS) was in receipt of an annual grant from the City Council of £1 500, which was increased to £1 800 in 1931,<sup>232</sup> whereafter the council in conjunction with the PBS made relief work available to many on the books of the society, as an alternative to charity.<sup>233</sup> The grant to the PBS was accordingly reduced. The heavy demands made on the society and the limited numbers of men who could be accommodated on relief works in the

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228. *Natal Mercury*, 14 May 1930.

229. *Natal Mercury*, 15 July 1930.

230. *Natal Mercury*, 23 December 1931.

231. *Natal Mercury*, 11 February 1933.

232. See City of Pietermaritzburg, City Treasurer's Reports in *Corporation Year Books* for relevant years.

233. See above, pp. 285 - 286.

city did, however, result in the council continuing to grant the society fairly substantial sums of money.<sup>234</sup> There were suggestions that efforts to alleviate the distress in the city ought to be co-ordinated, as the *Natal Witness* put it:

The disease of poverty, unemployment and the like are symptomatic of unscientific policy, so is unscientific indiscriminate and uncorrelated distribution of relief a token of our corporate unwisdom...the ordinary citizen can hardly be blamed, however open his hand, however generous his heart, if he hesitates to disburse the mushroom appeal, starting he knows not whence, ending he knows not where...The remedy is not a sudden and lonely sally to the rescue, but in marshalling all the available forces for the calculated and sage campaign...The remedy lies in this very marshalling of all the agencies now working and willing to work such as the churches, the philanthropic societies, the Grouzers, the Toc H and many others.<sup>235</sup>

Nothing appears to have been done to this end during the depression years. Sometimes charitable works were resented by members of the community they were intended to benefit. A gesture by the Pietermaritzburg Welfare Society in which meat was distributed free to Africans upset African meat traders, who had expected to make a profit over the Christmas period, but instead were left with unsold meat which could not be stored, resulting in a loss of earnings.<sup>236</sup>

In the smaller towns of Natal, the charitable organisations also appear to have operated under considerable pressure. A special door-to-door collection for poor families in Colenso was authorised by the council.<sup>237</sup> In Dundee, the Benevolent Society of the town received a special grant of £30 for the relief of distress,<sup>238</sup> while the council increased its grant to the society by £2 per month to assist a distressed family.<sup>239</sup> In August 1931, the Town Council provided for an extra street collection to raise funds:

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234. See City of Pietermaritzburg, City Treasurer's Reports in *Corporation Year Books*, 1932/33 - 1934/35.

235. Editorial, *Natal Witness*, 27 January 1931.

236. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 29 January 1932.

237. NAD, 3/COL, Minutes of the Town Council, 14 February 1933.

238. NAD, 3/DUN, Minutes of the Town Council, 27 May 1930.

239. NAD, 3/DUN, Minutes of Town Council, 26 February 1931.

...the Mayor referred to the urgent necessity for more assistance being given to the Benevolent Society and the desirability of providing for an additional street collection in that cause if at all possible. It was thereupon agreed that the August street collection be allocated to the Benevolent Society, that for St Dunstons to be taken in September, a reply to be sent to the effect that as the Council is using every endeavour to assist the Benevolent Society to meet its heavy calls on account of the present state of depression...<sup>240</sup>

So serious was the situation that the council granted the Benevolent Society £100 in the year 1932/33.<sup>241</sup>

In Eshowe, the town board granted permission for the Durban Benevolent Society to hold a street collection for the unemployed of Durban.<sup>242</sup> In Estcourt, the Benevolent Society received an additional £25 to cope with calls for assistance in 1931,<sup>243</sup> while the council was "co-operating with the Benevolent Society" in the matter of a destitute woman and her children in town.<sup>244</sup> It also authorised the payment of £4 2s 9d by the Benevolent Society to a destitute man "picked up by the police on the streets of Estcourt and taken to hospital".<sup>245</sup>

In Ladysmith, the Benevolent Society was forced to ask for an advance on its grant, "...owing to numerous calls for help being made during the present time of depression". A sum of £30 was advanced to the society.<sup>246</sup> Close co-operation between the society and the council was evident in the matter of relief works, although, as already shown, these were kept to a minimum in the town.<sup>247</sup> The society received a grant of £150 for the year 1931/32, a substantial increase on the

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240. NAD, 3/DUN, Minutes of the Town Council, 13 August 1931.

241. NAD, 3/DUN, Draft Estimates passed at Council Meeting, 27 October 1932.

242. NAD, 3/ESH, Minutes of the Town Board, 6 July 1931.

243. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Town Council, 17 February 1931.

244. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Town Council, 3 March 1931.

245. NAD, 3/EST, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 24 March 1931.

246. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 27 August 1931.

247. See above, pp. 289 - 290.

£60 normally received.<sup>248</sup> By January 1932, however, the society was in dire straits and an extra £50 was voted by the council.<sup>249</sup>

It is clear that charitable organisations throughout the province were sorely pressed to meet all the calls for assistance from members of the public during the depression years. Assistance was usually forthcoming from the public and from government, both at provincial and local level. Without such donations and grants, the societies would not have been able to contribute towards alleviating the distress caused by unemployment and drought. There were numerous individuals, however, who would accept neither employment on the relief works, nor charity. They preferred their independence, and it is for this reason that the informal sector of the economy flourished during the depression. Many of these activities were marginal, while others were clearly illegal.

One of the most lucrative activities in the latter category was the sale of liquor to Africans. In terms of existing legislation in Natal, it was illegal for Africans to drink or to be found in possession of, spirituous liquors, and it was an offence to sell such liquor to Africans. Davies has stated that 41 per cent of all whites convicted in the law courts of the Union in 1932 were charged with being illicit liquor dealers.<sup>250</sup> The only evidence which could be found for Natal was that only 119 whites were convicted on this charge in the area of jurisdiction of the Durban City Police between 1929/30 and 1933/34. Indians were also involved in this trade, for 95 were similarly convicted in the same period.<sup>251</sup>

Africans too made a living out of liquor. Many Africans found in the province-wide boycott of municipal beer halls an opportunity to make money by illegally brewing "utshwala". *Ilanga* alleged that the replacement of African porters and sweepers on the South African Railways was a contributory factor. Commenting on the retrenchment and replacement of Africans by "civilised" workers, the newspaper stated:

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248. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of the Town Council, 29 October 1931.

249. NAD, 3/LAD, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 28 January 1932.

250. Davies, *Capital*, p. 247.

251. Annual Reports of the Chief Constable, Mayor's Minutes for relevant years.

By this method numbers of unemployed Natives were augmented with the result that many resorted to a life of crime and illicit liquor dealing. The evil seems to be increasing year by year.<sup>252</sup>

Numerous complaints from municipalities throughout the province including Vryheid, Dundee, Durban and Pietermaritzburg indicate that there was a considerable decline in the sale of beer through accepted channels. Local authorities appear to have been convinced that this was due to an increase in illicit brewing and did not indicate that Africans had ceased to drink. The Town Clerk of Vryheid wrote to the Dundee Town Council:

The Natives have realised:

1. That there is good profit in illicit brewing
2. That the chances of detection are remote
3. That profits derived will easily pay any fines that may be imposed.

The result is:-

1. The Native Beer Halls are no longer paying (illicit beer is stronger than is allowed by law).
2. The Urban Areas are having to meet the loss on Locations.
3. No money is available for the improvement of Locations or as grants towards the Education of Natives as in the past.

The reason for the reduction of profits is attributed to the economic position but this is only partly true as in the case of this Borough during the weekends intoxicated Natives can be seen on all roads and they do not get the beer for nothing...<sup>253</sup>

In Dundee, the local police commander rejected allegations of widespread illicit brewing,<sup>254</sup> but there was no denying the considerable fall-off in revenue — to only £30 7s 2d in October 1932.<sup>255</sup> In Durban, the problem was more serious, as 7 344 Africans were convicted of illicit brewing or of being in possession of the ingredients to brew in the period between 1928/29 and 1933/34.<sup>256</sup>

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252. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 6 March 1931.

253. NAD, 3/DUN, Letter From Town Clerk of Vryheid, included in Town Council Minutes, 27 July 1933.

254. NAD, 3/DUN, Letter from the District Commandant (SAP) to Town Clerk, Town Council Minutes, 23 June 1932.

Other Africans made a living by selling meat in compounds, which aroused the ire of local butchers.<sup>257</sup> Unemployed artisans often went into business for themselves, making furniture, for example.<sup>258</sup> There was a considerable increase in the number of hawkers in all urban areas and all sorts of goods were sold in an effort to make a living. These included matches, razor blades, shoelaces, sweets, fruit and vegetables. One S L Combrink applied for a licence to operate as a "boot-black" to clean boots and shoes on the streets of Pietermaritzburg, another example of the enterprise of the unemployed.<sup>259</sup> Space does not permit a fuller discussion of the various individual initiatives in which people made a living in the informal sector of the economy during the depression years.

Viewed overall, efforts to alleviate distress during the depression years were generally surprisingly uncoordinated, perhaps as a result of a lack of effective leadership from government at all levels. This was certainly a common perception among the distressed section of the community, whose growing disenchantment with established politicians and party politics was a growing feature of the depression years. This will be discussed in the following chapter. There can be no doubt that the Hertzog government did a great deal to assist farmers and the rural unemployed in the Union, but less was done in Natal than in the other provinces. By singling out the rural sector for special attention, the government thrust the major portion of responsibility for alleviating distress in the urban areas onto local authorities and thus, ultimately, onto the ratepayers of the various towns in the province.

This responsibility the local authorities were reluctant to accept, because of the substantial costs involved and because many of them believed that the central government was shirking its responsibility. Yet for purely humanitarian reasons, the local authorities were forced to act. Most applied the government's "civilised

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255. NAD, 3/DUN, Minutes of the Town Council, 27 October 1932.

256. Annual Reports of the Chief Constable, Mayor's Minutes for relevant years.

257. *Natal Mercury*, 19 March 1931.

258. See previous chapter.

259. NAD, 3/PMB, Minutes of the Finance Committee, 23 October 1930.

labour" policy and gave preference to the employment of whites over persons of colour, while others attempted to resist this policy as far as was possible. The lack of proper statistical information, and the uncoordinated nature of relief, reduced the efficacy of such relief as was provided. Furthermore, employment on the relief works, the major form of assistance, was not available to all the deserving, as the unfit and women were not eligible. This type of assistance obviously also discriminated against Africans, as relief works were generally not available to them in the urban areas. Conditions on the relief works were not ideal; they were purposely designed to be less-than-attractive temporary measures to assist the unemployed only so long as the situation warranted them.

Charitable organisations also came under heavy pressure during the depression years, as cases of need grew sharply with each passing month. Most organisations were forced to ask for extra assistance from local authorities, the cost of which was inevitably passed on to the ratepayers. There can be little doubt that the depression sorely tested the capacity of all charitable organisations, and that some valuable lessons were learned. The Community Chest concept, which gained popularity during the depression years, is still in operation in most of the major urban centres of the province today.

There were many who refused both relief work and charity, and who attempted to face the crisis by taking individual action. They were, however, a minority. Not enough is known of the relief efforts made in the reserves which, as has been demonstrated, suffered greatly through depression, drought and natural disasters and this may provide a fruitful avenue for future researchers.

The majority of the white electorate looked to their government for assistance. Even though the electorate of Natal was generally highly suspicious of the Hertzog government, they were still disappointed at how little was done. No "dole" system was instituted, and it became painfully obvious that the government had little idea of the extent of unemployment in the province. It also failed to play a decisive role in finding creative solutions to the problems of unemployment and poverty. Only once the depression had passed, and the world was able to assess the efficacy of Keynesian economics and the "New Deal alphabet" solution of Roosevelt, was it realised that considerably more could indeed have been done for the unemployed

and the poverty-stricken. More which might not only have assisted the poor, but which might very well have reduced the length and the depth of the depression.

This, however, was only possible with hindsight which those at the time did not possess. Nevertheless, most were extremely harsh in their criticism of the established political leadership, in common with most of the distressed communities throughout the world, and many saw the solutions of the economic problems they were experiencing as lying in ridding the province of a government that demonstrably cared little for it.



## CHAPTER NINE

### THE DEPRESSION AND WHITE POLITICS IN NATAL

The Great Depression was not merely an economic catastrophe, it was the most severe test that the capitalist system had yet faced.<sup>1</sup> To many, deeply affected by the economic slump, it appeared that the entire system was about to collapse and tumble the capitalist world into chaos. The symptoms of the crisis were there for all to see: mass unemployment, poverty, and a consequent decline in the standards of living to which many had become accustomed.<sup>2</sup> The economic crisis led almost inevitably to a critical questioning of the system which had defaulted so grievously, even on the part of people who were not directly affected by it:

Nor was it only the direct victims of the depression who were affected by it. Others, observing what was happening to their fellow-men, began to wonder what kind of justification there was for a society which produced such results. The depression ceased to be merely an economic problem; it became a question mark directed at the values of western civilization and there were many who, finding no satisfactory answer, decided that there was no alternative other than to build a new society on totally different principles.<sup>3</sup>

This feeling of discontent which pervaded most countries throughout the affected world resulted, in some cases, in the re-formation and realignment of political groupings to meet the challenge posed by both the crisis and the disaffection and alienation resulting from it.<sup>4</sup> Existing political parties in several countries, whether in government or not, experienced a decline in popularity among the electorate as their inability to defuse the crisis became apparent and their actions degenerated into party-political squabbling.<sup>5</sup> Just one article from a Natal newspaper will suffice to illustrate this point:

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1. Rees, *Great Slump*, pp. 281 - 282.
  2. Cutforth, *Later than we thought*, p. 21. Cutforth argues that in sharp contrast to elsewhere in the capitalist world, standards of living in the United Kingdom were generally rising throughout the 1930s.
  3. Rees, *Great Slump*, p. 88.
  4. Coalitions of major parties were effected in many of the English-speaking countries, including

The South African Party's constitutional plank of 'Contributory Unemployment Insurance' had been accepted as a better object than [sic] 'Work or a Dole', but the South African Party are reminded that that is a matter for the future, and that the present immediate need is a remedy for the present unemployment, and the provision of immediate employment. The Nationalist party are reminded that their own Acts of Parliament have caused more unemployment in the towns than they have cured in the country, and they are asked what they are going to do about it. They are reminded while they preach thrift, they practise gross extravagance. The Labour Party are reminded of their failure to fulfil election promises, of their great and lost opportunities of their personal self-seeking, of the unscrupulousness of their present attempt to surpass the old immoral bribery of voters by politicians of the past with their own money by even more immoral bribery under democracy; the buying of votes by the promise of other people's money. They [the workless] say to all Parties: 'We are only the Unemployed. Unemployment is a state matter. A plague on all your Parties and Party bickering. You are all fiddling while Rome burns, although some of you even think it is inconsiderate of Rome to burn while you are fiddling.'<sup>6</sup>

This inability to ameliorate the distressed conditions of the populace led almost inevitably to the rise of "extremist" movements which saw salvation as lying in the total rejection of the existing system and its replacement by a drastically altered form of society. Not all such movements were overtly anti-capitalist, but many of them were extremely vocal in their criticisms of the shortcomings of the system.

Although, comparatively, the Union of South Africa did not suffer nearly as severely as many other countries, it did, to some extent, experience the same type of reaction, as many of its inhabitants found themselves affected severely enough to warrant protest on a political level. Yet it would not be entirely accurate to claim that the economic situation completely dominated the political life of Natal and the Union during the depression years. There were other issues which could not be banished from centre stage, one of these being the "Native Question".

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Great Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, although in the latter case, the depression had largely passed by the time coalition and fusion were achieved.

5. This was the charge that led to the formation of the so-called "best-man" ministries in Britain and Australia and was also a common cry among the disaffected in South Africa.
6. *Natal Mercury*, 5 November 1931.

The general election of 1929 had been fought almost exclusively on this issue. The National Party (NP) campaign, ably managed by Hertzog and Roos, had made political capital out of a speech made by Smuts, leader of the South African Party (SAP), envisaging a greater South Africa which would incorporate a number of "Native" territories. This was used by the NP to accuse Smuts of promoting the idea of a "Kaffir Republic" and of greatly increasing the "Native Problem".<sup>7</sup> These were classic "swart gevaar" tactics to which the electorate was responsive, for the NP was returned to power with an overall majority for the first time.<sup>8</sup> In his first term of office as Prime Minister, Hertzog had proposed a number of bills to deal with the "Native Question". Due to opposition from the SAP, these bills had languished in various select committees, and there they remained, despite attempts to extricate them, and despite the mandate given to the NP in the 1929 election. The "Native Bills" were suspended like the proverbial sword of Damocles over the entire political arena in the Union throughout the depression period.<sup>9</sup>

Another national issue, of real importance to Natal during this period, was the question of the relationship between the Union and Great Britain, and its position within the British Empire. Both Hertzog and Smuts had been in favour of the diplomatic moves which had resulted in the Balfour Declaration of 1926, but Hertzog and the NP appeared intent on further loosening the ties that bound the Union to Britain. Hertzog, however, privately disavowed being in favour of complete secession from the Empire.<sup>10</sup> He nevertheless wished the exact relationship to be defined in legislation, which resulted in the passing of the Statute of Westminster by the British Parliament in 1931. Other measures in the campaign to loosen ties had included the removal of the King's image from coinage and

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7. See Lacour-Gayet, *A History of South Africa*, p. 271.

8. Up to this point the National Party had been forced to rely on support from the Labour Party. The two parties had formed an election pact to displace the South African Party government headed by Smuts in the 1924 election. The pact saw several Labour Party members given cabinet portfolios. This was continued after 1929, although the NP no longer required their support, having secured an overall majority.

9. For a fuller discussion see Haines, "Opposition".

10. See above, p. 122. Hertzog replied to G N Hulett "...the National Party has never stood for secession and most decidedly after the 1926 declaration by the Imperial Conference, never will." CAD, A32, (Hertzog Papers) F96, Hertzog to Hulett, 31 August 1929.

stamps, and the creation of the Union's own flag and National Anthem.<sup>11</sup> These measures had significant political consequences in the Union, and in Natal, as many English-speakers saw them with some prescience as an attempt to abrogate their rights as citizens of the British Empire, and as the first steps towards the declaration of an Afrikaner republic. So ultra-sensitive did English-speaking Natalians become that almost any measure of the Afrikaner-dominated Hertzog government was seen as a threat to their unique English character.<sup>12</sup>

Nearly all the political movements that sprang up in Natal during the depression years had some measure of jingoism in their composition or espoused exclusively English values. Natal was, in many ways, politically isolated from the real centres of power in the Union. This isolation led to feelings of alienation and fostered a sense of self-reliance: many Natalians appeared to believe that the Afrikaner-dominated Hertzog government was not merely neglectful of their interests, but was openly working against them. The lack of government assistance to the urban unemployed was often cited as an example of this. If Natalians were to survive, and preserve the values that they held dear, action would have to be taken. These feelings fostered the growth of several movements which gained support among the unemployed and distressed section of the white community.

The first of these movements has already been alluded to: the "Grouzers" of Pietermaritzburg.<sup>13</sup> On 1 December 1930 the *Natal Witness* carried a report of the establishment of a movement called the Grouzers, to work for the alleviation of distress in the city. The movement began by initiating a soup kitchen and opening "an orderly room". The Grouzers were quick to stress that their activities were not charity, "...but a helping hand from the Grouzers and the people of our city".<sup>14</sup> Public response was rapid and encouraging. By 3 December, the movement had

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11. See Vickers, "Provincial Councils", 1970, p. 6.

12. Thompson, *Natalians*, and his prior paper "Province: Nation: Empire: Divided Loyalties in the English Polity", Paper given at Workshop on Natal History, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1980.

13. See above pp. 233ff.

14. *Natal Witness*, 1 December 1930. The distinction between "a helping hand" and charity was obviously a fine one.

already received funds and co-operation from local business; jobs had been found for 14 people and 193 persons had received free meals of soup and bread from their kitchen.<sup>15</sup> The Grouzers appealed to local businessmen to employ more white workers and to the public to support only white stores:

The Grouzers hope that the public will from now onwards support only Europeans, and if possible on a cash basis. Bring down the cost of living; but remember that European storekeepers have to pay assistants enough to enable them to live up to the European standard. Make your stores 100% European and get 100% of the city European trade [sic].<sup>16</sup>

The membership of the Grouzers was diverse but appears to have been restricted to those inhabitants of the city who desired anonymity for their charitable works. In an appeal for new members the Grouzers wrote:

If you are European and in employment you can enlist. You will not be paid and your name and good deeds will not be made public...<sup>17</sup>

This quest for anonymity was a characteristic of the Grouzers, and appears to have resulted from a rejection of the activities of publicity-hungry politicians. All members were obliged to remain anonymous and some members who advertised their membership of the movement were actually excluded from it. The Grouzers said that they had "...no room in their ranks for those who seek the lime-light and blow-hards are taboo".<sup>18</sup> The aims of the movement were clarified in two statements issued by the movement: "Let no man, woman or child go hungry, and do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." This appears to have been adopted as the motto of the movement.<sup>19</sup> Later in December 1930, the movement issued a second statement that:

We do not wish to interfere with private enterprise but work must be found for men who are willing to work and cannot get it. Poverty, starvation, and crime are closely related, and if

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15. *Natal Witness*, 3 December 1930.

16. *Natal Witness*, 3 December 1930.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Natal Witness*, 27 December 1930.

19. *Natal Witness*, 3 December 1930.

employment is found for every man and woman who wants it, the people of Maritzburg would see an empty house on practically every day. When that day comes, the Grouching season will be over.<sup>20</sup>

Within ten days of the establishment of the movement, the publicity it had received from the *Natal Witness* was such that enquiries from other centres throughout the Union had been received. The town of White River in the Transvaal even went so far as to ask for the establishment of a branch in their town.<sup>21</sup> The activities of the movement were documented almost on a daily basis in the *Witness*, and the newspaper's columns contained many heart-warming stories of people who had been assisted by the Grouchers.<sup>22</sup> The movement expanded rapidly. By 11 December 1930, they claimed a membership of 718 and said they could provide £715 to help the poor. By 16 December, their membership stood at 850.<sup>23</sup> By the end of December 1930, they claimed a membership of 1 000 and were feeding 600 hungry people every day.<sup>24</sup> The movement also gained popularity by planning to take the children of the poor on an outing to the Botanic Gardens,<sup>25</sup> and to create employment by setting up a boot-repair business. This latter idea, unsurprisingly, evoked strong reaction from cobblers in the city, but opposition appears to have faded because of the popularity of the movement.<sup>26</sup> Owen stated that their activities "dwarfed" all other attempts to relieve the problems of unemployment and poverty in the city.<sup>27</sup>

In January 1931, the political climate in the city became far more heated, mainly due to the lack of employment opportunities and the failure of the city council to do anything meaningful to alleviate the problem of unemployment through the

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20. *Natal Witness*, 27 December 1930. It may be inferred that "empty houses" would mean that the inhabitants were out at work, although the exact meaning is unclear.

21. *Natal Witness*, 10 December 1930.

22. See in particular *Natal Witness*, 10 December 1930.

23. *Natal Witness*, 16 December 1930.

24. *Natal Witness*, 27 December 1930.

25. *Natal Witness*, 10 December 1930.

26. *Natal Witness*, 27 December 1930.

27. Owen, "White Unemployment", p. 39.

expansion of existing relief works. On 14 January 1931 a meeting of the unemployed in the city composed a telegram to Prime Minister Hertzog demanding that he come to the city and find them employment. The situation almost became riotous:

By 6 o'clock no fewer than 143 men had made applications to the Grouzers asking them to send a telegram to this effect to General Hertzog. Many of the men were in a bad humour and talked wildly of revolution, but wiser councils decided to hold a mass meeting of the unemployed at 7.30 tonight in the City Gardens. A telegram will be sent only after a formal resolution has been passed.<sup>28</sup>

The meeting which passed the resolution was addressed by masked men, who claimed that there were 491 men registered as unemployed with the Grouzers, of whom 73 per cent were residents of the city and 94 per cent were "Europeans", which would have meant that there was a total of 460 unemployed white men in Maritzburg. The resolution was that the government should be requested to recognise the seriousness of the unemployment problem in the country, and urged to provide work or maintenance for unemployed men, at rates which were compatible with "civilised standards". The unemployed believed that they were not being given enough attention, or a fair chance when applying for employment. Some in the crowd were in favour of marching on the city hall, but the masked Grouzers appear to have dissuaded them in favour of "constitutional" means and promised to send a telegram to Hertzog.<sup>29</sup>

A deputation of the unemployed, which included three Grouzers was, however, later granted an interview with the Mayor. He indicated that the council believed that the responsibility for finding a solution to the problem of unemployment lay with the national government, and that the council in any case could not afford to accommodate any more men on the relief works. He added that the unemployed should be careful not to antagonise people.<sup>30</sup> This final sentiment was later echoed by the Minister of Justice, Oswald Pirow:

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28. *Natal Witness*, 15 January 1931.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Natal Witness*, 16 January 1931.

One aspect of unemployment, however, was causing the Government considerable difficulty. This was through so-called leaders of the unemployed with employment unions which seemed to exist chiefly for the purpose of organising demonstrations... Genuine unemployed should not allow themselves to be led about in street processions, which did not impress the Government in the least degree.<sup>31</sup>

While this might have held true at a national level, the Grouzers' campaign to publicise the extent of white unemployment in Pietermaritzburg, and the volatile nature of the situation, did lead to the speedy arrival of Mr S D Roberts, an official of the regional office of the Department of Labour in Durban, to investigate the problem.<sup>32</sup> Significantly, Roberts met with the Grouser leadership, who appear to have reiterated claims that there were over 400 unemployed white men in the city.<sup>33</sup> Upon investigation, however, these claims were proved to be grossly inflated and this led to the Grouzers being partially discredited.<sup>34</sup> This coincided with the arrest of Captain Robert Brady, alleged to be the leader of the Grouzers, together with other members of the movement, on charges of common assault.<sup>35</sup>

The final demise of the movement came after the Grouzers had published their accounts for public scrutiny in the *Witness*. The accounts revealed little of their real financial position and, indeed, led to public questioning of the accounting procedures of the movement and their control over what were essentially public funds. Although not explicitly stated, it was implied that the movement had misappropriated funds.<sup>36</sup> Brady and Kean, his co-accused, were found guilty of assault. Although the court accepted that they had reacted out of the purest of motives,<sup>37</sup> the accused had acted wrongfully in taking the law into their own hands.<sup>38</sup> The movement appears to have simply faded away after this judgement; the anonymity of the movement's members made it easy for this to happen.

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31. *Natal Mercury*, 6 October 1931.

32. *Natal Witness*, 22 January 1931.

33. See above p. 234, where the salient parts of the interview Roberts gave to the *Natal Witness* are reproduced.

34. See above p. 233 - 235.

35. *Natal Witness*, 26 January 1931.

36. Owen, "White Unemployment", pp. 48 - 49.

37. It was alleged that one of victims of the assault had stolen money out of a collection box, while



Despite the short-lived nature of this movement, it did enjoy a measure of success. Unfortunately, in common with many other associations in Natal at this time, the movement and its records vanished simultaneously, so no real analysis of its membership, including their class positions, can be attempted. It is interesting to note, however, that the movement exhibited certain militaristic characteristics common to fascist and quasi-fascist movements operating elsewhere in the Union and beyond at this time.<sup>39</sup> The movement was led by a former military officer, Captain Brady; it opened an "orderly room" and talked of "ranks" within the movement. Physical violence and intimidation were also evident. It is not uncommon, when civilian leadership is lacking, or is perceived to be lacking, for military leaders to arise, and to attract a following. The chaos and disorder of civilian life, especially in this time of crisis, caused many an old soldier to hanker after the military-life, where decisions were left to an enlightened leadership in the blind hope that all would be well. In an army, men are fed and cared for; and there is a sense of camaraderie and sharing of a common burden. Racism was also a definite hallmark of this movement, as has been illustrated.

These characteristics were shared by the People's Unarmed Force, which operated in Durban. This movement grew out of the Workers' Protection League, a movement set afoot by Major Francis Giles and Mr J B Rintoul, a prominent labour organiser in Durban. The Workers' Protection League first sprang to prominence when, in July 1931, members were invited into the council chamber while the town council was in session.<sup>40</sup> The deputation accused the council of being "apathetic" and of not doing enough to assist the unemployed of the town. It demanded the resignation of the entire council, with the exception of the Mayor, the Revd A Lamont.<sup>41</sup> It appears Lamont was singled out for favour as "...he best understood

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another had sent suggestive letters to a young lady. See *Natal Witness*, 2 February 1931.

38. *Natal Witness*, 2 February 1931.

39. See Edley, "Population", pp. 107 - 108, where a précis is given of some of the salient characteristics of fascism.

40. They had threatened to invade the chamber unless they were given permission to address the council.

41. *Natal Mercury*, 1 August 1931.

the unemployment position in Durban".<sup>42</sup> The League moved quickly to establish itself and fired off a series of requests to the council asking for *inter alia*, free office accommodation, free transport on trams, a free telephone service and a donation from the council's grants-in-aid budget, all of which were merely noted by the council.

When no positive reaction was forthcoming, the council chamber was invaded by workless members of the League, chanting in unison, "We want work!"<sup>43</sup> They urged the council to take a more sympathetic and pragmatic view of unemployment in the town:

Pick and shovel schemes...were necessary, but they were merely palliatives. On the other hand, housing schemes for Europeans, Asiatics and Natives, the beautifying of the town, would open up avenues of employment for all classes of workmen...it was further hoped that the Council would take a broad view and elaborate extensive annual improvements for the benefit of the town adding to its amenities and the pleasure of visitors and also maintaining employment.<sup>44</sup>

It appears that there were some members of the Workers' Protection League who disagreed with the forceful leadership style and tactics of Major Giles, for the movement split; a faction headed by Giles hived off to become the Active Unemployed Workers' Association (AUWA), while the remainder chose Rintoul as their leader. Giles blamed the split on a "communist tendency" in the League.<sup>45</sup> The town council simply refused to deal with Giles, or any other movement allegedly representing the unemployed other than the Durban Trades Union Unemployment Committee.<sup>46</sup>

The manifesto of the AUWA proclaimed that the movement had been established to uphold the cause of justness and right; to find work for its members; to ensure that

42. *Natal Mercury*, 14 August 1931.

43. *Natal Mercury*, 10 August 1931.

44. *Ibid.*

45. *Natal Mercury*, 17 August 1931.

46. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 14 August 1931. Despite other references to this body, no records have yet been found.

no man or woman who was willing to work but could not find any, starved; and to pursue measures to accomplish these ends.<sup>47</sup> The council continued to be discouraging: they again refused to recognise Giles as a leader of the unemployed,<sup>48</sup> to donate any funds to his movement,<sup>49</sup> to allow him to rent the town hall,<sup>50</sup> or even to supply free of charge the services of the town orchestra for a fund-raising dance.<sup>51</sup> Despite this official disapprobation, the movement raised funds through unsanctioned street collections, which aroused the ire of councillors who demanded to know how the monies so collected were being spent.<sup>52</sup> When Giles countered this by requesting a council official to audit the association's books and to monitor collections, the council refused.<sup>53</sup>

In February, the AUWA transformed itself into the People's Unarmed Force (PUF) and became more militant, as the unemployment situation in the town worsened. The "Adjutant" of the PUF, Mr L Glassberg, sent a letter to the council on behalf of the General Officer Commanding the PUF, Major Giles, demanding that he be allowed to address the council:

Will you please arrange for myself and Staff Officers to interview the Committee of the Council at an early date as possible [*sic*] to discuss certain matters relative to and necessary for the welfare of this force? I wish to make it clear beyond doubt, without any attempt to appear autocratic, that unless recognition be given at once to this Force as a strong representative one, an immediate demonstration of the fact will be made by an incursion into the Council Chamber during the sitting of the Council. This action can be avoided by the granting of the request as made herein.<sup>54</sup>

The Force was demanding that an area within the town be designated for the

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47. *Natal Mercury*, 17 August 1931.

48. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 5 November 1931.

49. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 30 November 1931.

50. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 5 November 1931.

51. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 30 November 1931.

52. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 8 December 1931.

53. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 5 February 1932.

54. *Natal Mercury*, 18 February 1932. Note the militaristic terms employed.

accommodation of a tent or hut town, where the unemployed and destitute could be housed. This "camp" would be run on strict military lines and the "highest moral standards would be rigidly enforced". The site should preferably be near the sea, "bathing and sun-baths being essential". It was hoped to attract some 1 000 homeless and destitute persons to this site, and the letter continued:

The objects under this scheme are directed essentially to the relief of distress and poverty, and families without food and shelter will be assisted to obtain same. With so many houseless persons and families [*sic*] this state of affairs is intolerable and against all public morality. The abolition of street collections is to be commended, and this force proposed providing food by means of military kitchens run on proper lines, where wholesome food will be provided. The accommodation available at the various homes is inadequate, and for this reason this force invites the co-operation of the Town Council in a scheme to provide for the needy...<sup>55</sup>

The *Natal Mercury* published a full-page interview with Major Giles, in which he successfully managed to portray himself as the rising Hitler in the town. Excerpts are reproduced below:

The "Force" was founded three weeks ago. It is perfectly organised on strict military lines. It is disciplined, and every man, N.C.O. and officer has signed an oath of allegiance to me. We are barely 1 000 strong now, and in five weeks we will be 5 000 strong...The "Force" is loyal to a man, and our first move will be the establishment of a camp in Victoria Park, where we will gather 1 000 men with women and children. We demand from the Town Council the right to do this and such services as control of sanitation, light and water. If we are refused permission we will be forced to establish the camp. We have 1 000 men. There are 174 policemen, and besides, what policeman will stand against us? Who will dare to break up a happy, healthful camp of 1 000 men and families? The camp will be established.

Giles stated the necessity for the camp in the following terms:

These unfortunate unemployed are being forced down into degradation. Homes are being sold up every day. European families are being crowded into one room. Some are sharing accommodation with Natives and Indians. We will uplift them

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55. *Natal Mercury*, 18 February 1932. The reference to the abolition of street collections refers to the measures adopted after the introduction of the Community Chest, on 1 January 1932.

and give them happiness. To feed them we will rely upon gifts and donations. We do not fear on that ground. A military kitchen will be run by experienced army cooks — indeed, most of our men are ex-servicemen. Every man will do what work he can about the camp. The women will sew their own clothes. Every member of the 'Force' will go into the camp. I will be there with my family.

The "Force" would also have economic power:

We will be strong enough to establish economic boycotts. We will picket shops if we feel that the owners are not accepting their responsibility to the unemployed. There will be no brute force unless force is used against us. In every shop, business and factory, every industrial concern we will have our representatives — members of our Intelligence Staff - so that everything is known to us. Every member will wear a badge. Those who do not are not of the 'Force,' and anyone unlawfully wearing the badge will be most severely dealt with.

Then the megalomania emerged:

If it is necessary we will take control of the whole town. There will be thousands behind us. Already men in work are joining up. We will get others from all branches of work. At the October municipal elections we will control the voting. We will put forward candidates and give our support to those who pledge us their support. The 'Force' will spread throughout the country. When we are organised properly here we will go to other towns. The 'Force' will be a great thing. We will control the Provincial Councils and the Government.<sup>56</sup>

The council was determined not to allow the PUF to gain a foothold in the town, and refused permission for the establishment of the camp on the site requested by the movement. It was also decided that steps would be taken to prevent any incursions into the council chamber.<sup>57</sup> Despite objections from local residents, the PUF did erect a marquee on privately owned ground near the Alhambra Theatre, in which members were housed. The Town Council immediately instituted court proceedings to secure the eviction of the PUF.<sup>58</sup> Giles and his men were ordered off the premises and were held liable for the council's legal costs.<sup>59</sup> They appear to have simply moved elsewhere.

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56. All quotations from *Natal Mercury*, 19 February 1932.

57. *Natal Mercury*, 19 February 1932.

The PUF attempted to ingratiate itself with the council by posing as a disciplined para-military force which could be deployed to maintain law and order:

The maintenance of law and order and an earnest disciplined control of its members under strict military rule will show conclusively that the 'Force' — far from being a militant one and imbued with gasconading and belligerent tendencies — is one making for Peace... The preservation of law and order must follow, and the power of the 'Force' will be a valuable adjunct to the existing powers that be in the case of necessity, should aid be at any time sought.<sup>60</sup>

Although the PUF publicly claimed that it was doing much to assist the unemployed, it admitted that it was not receiving the support it desired, for it had accumulated debts amounting to some £300.<sup>61</sup> The thousand-strong force had either not appeared or had dissipated when a reporter visited the camp in June 1932, for he found only fifty men encamped.<sup>62</sup> Nor, despite claims to the contrary, did the movement enjoy widespread support amongst the electorate, for when Giles stood for election to the town council in August 1932, he received only 136 votes and came a poor third, securing only 5 per cent of the votes cast.<sup>63</sup>

The PUF, quite obviously, exhibited traits similar to those of fascist movements elsewhere. It was perhaps in some measure due to the phlegmatic character of the majority of the white inhabitants of Durban that the PUF was simply tolerated and its appeal to the masses largely ignored. Equally valid, however, must be the argument that the PUF was not the only movement competing for public support at the time. Other movements, like the Natal Devolution League, also with economic issues as part of their platform, simply condemned the PUF to obscurity after its brief period of coruscating life.

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58. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 1 March 1932.

59. *Natal Mercury*, 30 March 1932.

60. *Natal Mercury*, 26 February 1932.

61. *Natal Mercury*, 18 August 1932.

62. *Natal Mercury*, 22 June 1932.

63. *Natal Mercury*, 4 August 1932.

Another quasi-fascist movement operating in Durban, the New Guard of South Africa, was associated with the British Union of Fascists led by Sir Oswald Mosley. The "Honorary Organiser" was another ex-serviceman, Major R E J Kay.<sup>64</sup> This movement appears to have established close links with its British and Australian counterparts, through an association called "A New Empire Union of Fascists".<sup>65</sup> Little is known of the Natal branch, which is only mentioned in scattered references. Amos described it as follows:

According to *Liberty* [a fascist journal] the Guards' South African counterpart was a movement founded in Natal under the original title of the 'British Guard'. In an experience resembling that of New South Wales, a group of Pro-British militants had broken away from the British Guard and had named themselves the 'New Guard'. *Liberty* states that an affiliation was effected between the South African and Australian New Guards in August 1932.<sup>66</sup>

The New Guard also appears to have been organised on military lines as there was a reference to "unit leaders".<sup>67</sup> The movement sent a letter to the Community Chest in the town warning it that "more than half" of the recipients of aid were "not from this Province" and demanded that such persons should not be given aid from the Chest.<sup>68</sup> Despite protestations to the contrary, the New Guard was a racist organisation, open only to "all men of British birth and extraction, and to all sons of naturalised Britishers".<sup>69</sup> The movement appears to have concerned itself with the plight of the unemployed as a special meeting was called to discuss this question in September 1933.<sup>70</sup> The New Guard took up the case of Natal's relationship to the rest of the Union after 1933 but, despite considerable support, little of concrete value was achieved.<sup>71</sup>

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64. *Natal Mercury*, 14 September 1933.

65. Amos, *The New Guard Movement*, pp. 95 - 96.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

67. *Natal Mercury*, 14 September 1933.

68. *Natal Mercury*, 24 September 1933.

69. *Natal Mercury*, 24 November 1933.

70. *Natal Mercury*, 14 September 1933.

71. See Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 110 - 118.

The last of the fascist-type movements to be detailed here was the Greyshirt Movement set up by Mr Harold Dold. Dold was managing director of the Denis Chain Company in Durban<sup>72</sup> and an inveterate letter writer, not only bombarding the local press with frequent missives, but also pestering the Prime Minister, General Hertzog, with unsolicited advice.<sup>73</sup> Dold began a journal, called *The Industries of South Africa* with financial assistance from W Seals-Wood of Lever Brothers and Malcolm Barker of the Durban Falkirk Iron Company, in 1932.<sup>74</sup> In this journal he posited certain radical plans for the reshaping of South African economic life. The journal appears to have become a political mouthpiece for Dold, who used it as the basis for his entry into politics in October 1933.

Dold stood for election to parliament as an "Independent Industrial Candidate"<sup>75</sup> in the Umbilo constituency, and appeared at the sitting of the nomination court clad in a grey shirt with a springbok badge on it. The *Mercury* reported that he intended to "storm the electorate with a greyshirt brigade".<sup>76</sup> Economic issues were obviously of paramount importance to Dold:

If matters are to continue as they are now, the coming generation will be thrown into the mire and will be mentally and physically degraded by our present financial system. Our present system is supported by the Government of the country, but the Greyshirt Movement will change it for a system which will mean the rebirth of a nation.<sup>77</sup>

This appeal to youth was common to fascist movements and formed a significant part of the content of *The Industries*.<sup>78</sup> Dold denied that his movement had links with other anti-semitic fascist movements in the country. His political manifesto

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72. G Coleman, "Harold Dold, the Industrial Movement and the *Industries of South Africa*", B A (Hons) Long Essay, University of Natal (Durban), 1982, p. 7.

73. See frequent references in CAD, A32, Hertzog Papers.

74. Coleman, "Harold Dold", p. 7.

75. *Natal Mercury*, 16 October 1933.

76. *Natal Mercury*, 31 October 1933.

77. *Natal Mercury*, 2 November 1933.

78. See Coleman, "Harold Dold", p. 22.



suggested not only the scrapping of the private banking system, but also the concentration of wealth in the hands of the Reserve Bank. South Africa was a rich country which could finance its own development.<sup>79</sup>

The movement's adoption of the Nazi salute was, according to Dold, of little significance:

We must have a sign. At first we thought of raising the fist, but we realised that this might be taken as a sign of hostility. We could hardly adopt the British salute, or the Russian salute. After all, the movements of the body are definitely limited. The Nazi salute is a spontaneous movement of the arm and we adopted that. It is as good as any other.<sup>80</sup>

It appears that Dold was advocating radical right-wing solutions to the problems of the Union. When asked if he intended to establish a dictatorship, Dold replied that his ultimate aim was "fascism".<sup>81</sup> His manifesto alienated practically all the voters in the constituency, particularly as the use of the springbok badge was offensive to sportsmen, and Jews were uneasy with his Nazi-style tactics. He received only 53 votes in the election, a result which cost him his deposit.<sup>82</sup> The *Mercury* termed his defeat

indicative of the public's refusal to take him or his political militarism seriously...people in this country are too sensible to treat would-be dictators as anything but a joke.<sup>83</sup>

Dold then faded into the background, although *The Industries* continued in publication until 1936, when it ceased.<sup>84</sup>

Right-wing politicians in the province failed to make any significant impact on the electorate. Their movements generally enjoyed a limited lifespan and, while they might have attracted the attention of those members of society (particularly ex-

79. *Natal Mercury*, 2 November 1933.

80. *Ibid.*

81. *Natal Mercury*, 10 November 1933.

82. *Natal Mercury*, 25 November 1933.

83. *Natal Mercury*, 24 November 1933.

84. Coleman, "Harold Dold", p. 26.

servicemen) who hankered after any kind of strong leadership, they were not, apparently, able to sustain their attraction or to convert it into electoral support. They appear to have had some novelty value, but once the initial enthusiasm wore off and the movements proved unable to deliver on their grandiose promises, people seem to have drifted away. They preyed on the helpless and the hopeless; prime pickings for any over-ambitious politician. There can be no doubt that the economic crisis created a climate in which these movements enjoyed support, or which enabled them to gain momentary credence, but ultimately, the economic system in Natal did not fail on a truly massive scale and this may have robbed them of glory. On the other hand, perhaps Kingston-Russell was right when he suggested that Natalians were simply too sensible not to see tin-pot would-be dictators as anything but a joke.

The same attitude was not generally exhibited towards those of socialist, syndicalist or even communist bent. Both Durban and Pietermaritzburg had members of the Labour Party on their councils and while, at times, some of the leadership of the "left" became a little strident or talked wildly of "revolution", they tended to be in the minority and did not garner significant support. The economic situation was obviously of prime concern to them, but only the Communist Party advocated the protection and furtherance of the rights of all workers. Supporters of the Labour Party, and other trade-unionists, were generally advocates of the rights of white workers and actually strove to promote these over the rights of black workers.

Perhaps the most significant achievement of the trade union movement was the formation of the Trades Union Joint Unemployment Committee, also known as the Combined Trades Union Unemployment Committee (CTUUC), which was formed in 1930 to serve as a co-ordinating and monitoring body on unemployment in Natal. The committee included representatives from the councils of Pietermaritzburg and Durban, the Provincial Council, the South African Railways, the Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the Motor Traders' Association, and the Durban Benevolent Society; as well as the Town Clerks and Borough Engineers of both towns, the Provincial Secretary and Treasurer, regional representatives of the Department of Labour and also of the unemployed.<sup>85</sup> It is indeed significant that

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85. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Council-in-Committee, 14 August 1931.

the trade union movement was able to secure the support of all these bodies in attempts to monitor the unemployment situation of whites and to co-ordinate and oversee the relief provided. However, no records of the committee could be traced. It appears that the committee enjoyed a great deal of support, as it was the only body representing the white unemployed of Durban that was recognised by the Durban Town Council.<sup>86</sup>

A prominent Durban labour organiser, Mr Frank Cheek, was appointed Honorary Secretary to the committee. In an interview in June 1931, he indicated that considerable delays were being experienced in the provision of relief to the unemployed, that patience was wearing thin, and that resort might have to be made to demonstrations.<sup>87</sup> One such demonstration was, indeed, held in Durban in July 1931 and was addressed by several prominent labour leaders: Councillor Wanless, Mr J B Rintoul, Mr J F Trembath and Councillor Mrs A E Benson among them. The demonstration dispersed peacefully when Mrs Benson assured the unemployed that the council was doing all it could within the confines of its resources, and would soon be initiating several new projects to provide work.<sup>88</sup> Encouraged by local labour leaders, a delegation of artisans in Durban waited upon the Mayor to ask that the "civilised labour" policy be more strictly applied to prevent Indians from undercutting wages.<sup>89</sup>

In Pietermaritzburg, a local storekeeper, Mr L H Greene, appears to have set himself up as the champion of the unemployed. He advocated more radical measures: the unemployed should unite and organise themselves to demand a more "equitable distribution of the wealth of South Africa and to eliminate unemployment from South Africa". He demanded that work, maintenance, food and shelter be supplied "at once".<sup>90</sup> In a series of public meetings called to address the problem of unemployment, Greene suggested that the people of the city should

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86. *Natal Mercury*, 27 June 1931.

87. *Ibid.*

88. *Natal Mercury*, 2 July 1931.

89. *Natal Mercury*, 7 July 1931.

90. *Natal Witness*, 22 January 1931.

"force" the government to do something for the unemployed, as they had a right to assistance, having paid taxes in the past.<sup>91</sup> Greene had strong socialist sympathies; he demanded the abolition of overtime, the end of piece-work and the reduction by 50 per cent of all salaries over £25 per month. He wanted the concept of "one man, one job" entrenched.<sup>92</sup> His socialist tendencies appear to have provoked the Grouser, for one of the charges against the Grouser leaders was "interfering with the liberty" of Greene.<sup>93</sup>

Greene, however, does not appear to have believed that relief works were an answer to the problem of unemployment, as he said that the unemployed "did not want relief or charity".<sup>94</sup> Instead, he called upon the government to "unlock the land".<sup>95</sup> Later in 1931, he called upon the unemployed of Pietermaritzburg to organise themselves into commandos to raid the Railways,<sup>96</sup> and declared that "Oom Paul would disown this government". He stated that Natal was receiving the lamb's share of unemployment and benevolent relief and like a lamb Natal was being led to the slaughter.<sup>97</sup> He declared that a great revolution would follow raids on the railways, and blamed the government for fanning the flames of revolution through their neglect of the unemployed.<sup>98</sup> Despite the ever-worsening unemployment situation in the city, Greene appears to have faded from the picture after 1932.

As the situation deteriorated in Durban, so left-wing political activists became less accommodating and more vocal. Mr Ben Matthews, a prominent activist in the town, told crowds that they should proceed by constitutional means, "...but if the worst comes to the worst, ...we have not forgotten 1922 yet".<sup>99</sup> Matthews, according

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91. *Natal Witness*, 22 January 1931.

92. *Natal Witness*, 26 January 1931.

93. Owen, "White Unemployment", p. 49. Exactly what was meant by this is unclear.

94. *Natal Witness*, 24 February 1931.

95. *Ibid.*

96. The railways were reputed to hold in stock many of the items that the poor wanted but could not afford. See Owen, "White Unemployment", p. 66.

97. *Natal Witness*, 10 September 1931.

98. *Ibid.*

99. *Natal Mercury*, 8 July 1931.

to the *Mercury*, "confessed to being both a Bolshevik and a communist".<sup>100</sup> Another activist, Mr R H Goodrum, was quoted as saying that in order to solve the problem of unemployment, the men must have their own representatives on the town and provincial councils and even in parliament.<sup>101</sup>

As a direct result of this agitation, the Durban Town Council announced new developments to cope with the crisis. These included the formation of the Mayor's Unemployment Relief Fund, an increased contribution by the Provincial Council to Durban, and a soup kitchen which was started at the Durban Home for Men. The council gave the JTUUC permission to hold a street collection, which brought in £204 3s 4d.<sup>102</sup>

The unity of the JTUUC was shattered by the hiving off of Major Giles and his faction of the Workers' Protection League<sup>103</sup> and by Rintoul's faction which also left the ambit of the JTUUC.<sup>104</sup> This splintering of the co-ordinating body led to its demise, and it handed over the balance of its funds to the Benevolent Society in Durban.<sup>105</sup> Thus ended the umbrella organisation with perhaps the most significant chance of dealing with the crisis.

The Communist Party in the province, once largely the preserve of whites, had become enmeshed in difficulties through implementing the "native republic" policy handed down from Moscow.<sup>106</sup> This led to the alienation of whites and the "Africanisation" of the party.<sup>107</sup> One issue which briefly welded the unemployed into a cohesive force was the expulsion order served on the communist activist, Eddie Roux. Roux was working as an industrial chemist in Durban and was very

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100. *Natal Mercury*, 8 July 1931.

101. *Ibid.*

102. *Natal Mercury*, 14 July 1931. Interview with Mr Cheek.

103. *Natal Mercury*, 15 August 1931.

104. *Ibid.*

105. *Natal Mercury*, 19 September 1931.

106. See La Hausse, "Ethnicity and History", p. 308, n40.

107. This will be discussed in the following chapter.

active in the Communist Party in the town. A mass meeting of the unemployed was held which passed a resolution condemning the expulsion order. The meeting also condemned conditions on the relief works, which were described as "torture", "slave dealing" and "slow murder".<sup>108</sup>

Conversely, the issue of unemployment was one which united virtually all the socialists and trade-unionists in the town. At a meeting of one thousand people, many of them unemployed, in the town in 1932, the speakers, including Frank Cheek, Ben Matthews and H Dougherty, called on the town council and the government to do more for the unemployed. They advocated that the council should take out a loan to fund development which would provide relief for the unemployed in the town; that the government be urged to make £4 000 000 available to maintain the unemployed; and that housing and feeding schemes for the homeless and workless should be immediately implemented.<sup>109</sup>

Matthews recommended the setting up of a co-operative store, as Indian storekeepers were allegedly overcharging relief workers. Some trade unions implemented a "poor rate", whereby members of unions still in employment contributed a portion of their earnings to a fund to assist their unemployed brethren. The Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers paid some £520 to 200 unemployed members in a period of three months,<sup>110</sup> while the members of the Typographical Union who were still employed, each paid 5s per week into a similar fund.<sup>111</sup>

The moderate left-wing politicians enjoyed some success in being elected to office in Durban and Pietermaritzburg, in elections for the provincial council, and even in parliamentary elections during the depression period,<sup>112</sup> but the more radical members were spurned by the electorate. Like the politicians of the "right-wing", the politicians of the "left-wing" suffered partial eclipse by other political

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108. *Natal Mercury*, 27 October 1931.

109. *Natal Mercury*, 23 June 1932.

110. *Natal Mercury*, 14 April 1932.

111. *Natal Mercury*, 23 April 1932.

112. See Edley, "Population", pp. 119 - 121.

movements, notably the Natal Devolution League, which was able to sustain interest largely as a result of the continuous publicity afforded the movement by the *Natal Mercury*.

The Natal Devolution League (NDL) grew out of the fear that the government intended to abolish the provincial councils. The provincial councils had been incorporated in the South Africa Act of 1909 mainly as a sop to Natal.<sup>113</sup> The councils had limited legislative and administrative capabilities and even more limited access to funding, being forced to rely on the central or Union government for subsidies to finance their activities.<sup>114</sup> This arrangement was comfortable for neither the central government nor the Natalians, but the issue did not really become significant until the National Party (NP) began to question the efficacy of the councils in September 1929. Speaking at the Cape congress of the NP, Minister of Finance Mr N C Havenga said that the system might have to be re-organised for purposes of economy. He added that the provincial system could pose a danger to the South African nation as a whole, as a single province might choose to isolate itself — especially Natal, whose geographical boundaries largely coincided with political and racial divisions.<sup>115</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed at other provincial congresses of the party; even the Natal congress of the NP was in favour of abolition as they wanted the NP to take control of education in the province.<sup>116</sup>

Nor was the South African Party (SAP), led by General J C Smuts, entirely convinced of the necessity for the provincial council system. Leading lights within the party, including Smuts, Deneys Reitz, Jan Hofmeyr and Patrick Duncan were reputed to be against the system.<sup>117</sup> In sharp contrast to this negative attitude, a faction of the SAP in Natal were generally in favour not only its retention but of the extension of the powers of the councils.<sup>118</sup> Included in this group were Heaton Nicholls, Felix Hollander and Major G R Richards. Heaton Nicholls went so far as

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113. See Thompson, *Natalians*, pp. 1 - 9.

114. *Ibid.*, pp. 50 - 53.

115. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

116. *Ibid.*

117. *Ibid.*, pp. 56 - 57.

118. Vickers, "Provincial Council", pp. 33 - 45.

to form a federal wing within the SAP, and began pressurising the party to recognise Natal's rights.<sup>119</sup>

Parallel with these developments within the ranks of the political parties, an alternative movement was set afoot by one Stuart Helps. Helps had been involved in a number of "imperialist" military adventures, notably the Jameson Raid and the Ndebele and Swazi Rebellions. He had also served in the South African War. He claimed to have been largely responsible for the exclusion of the "Native Territories" from the Union of South Africa in 1910. In 1911 he published *The Imperial British Empire*, an imperialist polemic calling for unity.<sup>120</sup> He then apparently turned his hand to farming, before settling in Durban. He was described as "a government and military contractor",<sup>121</sup> but may also have supplemented his income by working as an "itinerant oculist".<sup>122</sup> In J R Kingston Russell, editor of the *Natal Mercury*, Helps found a redoubtable ally. Imported from the Cape, where he had been associated with the *Cape Times*, Russell was thought by the Robinson and Collins families (who controlled a considerable proportion of *Mercury* stock) to be the ideal person to further Natal's interests.<sup>123</sup>

In 1931, discontent over the government's perceived "mishandling" of the economic crisis, and general unhappiness over "Afrikanerisation", began to crystallize into ideas associated with the secession of the province from the Union. Ill-formed at first, these ideas began to receive more and more prominence in the columns of the *Mercury*, prompting that newspaper to begin a public debate on the topic of "Home Rule or Separation?". The newspaper concluded that devolution represented the better of the two options.<sup>124</sup> On 9 April 1931 Helps, in a long letter to the editor of

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119. A H Duminy, "The Death of the Federal Movement, 1932-1934", Paper presented at Workshop on Natal History, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 1980, pp. 1 - 2.

120. J S D Helps, *The Imperial British Empire*, Robinson and Co, Durban, 1911.

121. For information on Helps see *Natal Who's Who*, Durban, 1933, p. 133; Vickers, "Provincial Councils", pp. 206, 243; Walker, "Provincial Councils", p. 206; Edley, "Devolution League", p. 21; T Wilks, *For the Love of Natal*, Robinson and Co, Durban, 1977, p. 186; Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 77.

122. KCAL, MS Nicholls, KCM 3774 (17), "History of the Devolution Movement", p. 5.

123. Thompson, *Natalians*, pp. 65 - 66.

124. *Ibid.*, p. 66.



the *Mercury*, was extremely critical of the Hertzog government's economic policies and highlighted the "threat" to the provincial councils. Helps advocated that Natal should first separate from the Union, and then renegotiate her association with the other states on a federal basis. He castigated the government:

...since we cannot expect fair play, or prevent further spoliation by the present 'carpet bag' Government, it behoves us to safeguard our own interests by taking our affairs out of their hands. The right to secede was clearly defined at the last Imperial Conference, so we need not waste time arguing that issue; as it is clear that Natal can withdraw from the Union if she wishes to. Secession does not mean splendid isolation on the part of Natal; we can still co-operate with our sister States. But we must manage our own internal affairs and have absolute control over our finances.<sup>125</sup>

He also suggested that Natal would not be saved by the SAP:

It is useless relying on the chance of a change of Government to improve our position, as General Smuts is as much against any system of decentralisation as the present Government. Indeed, it is doubtful if the Provincial Councils would still be in existence had General Smuts remained in office. Mr Havenga is well aware that he has a safe ally in General Smuts, and that is why he has invited him to join issue with the Government in solving the Provincial Council problem. Neither can we expect our Natal members of Parliament to take any definite lead, as they have no mandate from Natal to act on.<sup>126</sup>

Setting out the economic position of Natal *vis-à-vis* the other provinces, Helps argued that it was "sheer lunacy for Natal to continue under the present system". He showed that although far more revenue was contributed to the coffers of the Union via excise duty by Natal than by the other provinces, Natal received the least benefit. Even the Orange Free State received a larger provincial subsidy, and had more spent on her poor, than Natal. He also dwelt on the serious position of Natal's coal industry, which he said was suffering from the depression and from the "unbusinesslike administration of our railways and harbours", which included inequitable railway rates.<sup>127</sup>

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125. *Natal Mercury*, 9 April 1931.

126. *Ibid.*

127. *Ibid.*

Helps found allies in Colonel E M Greene,<sup>128</sup> Robert Mackenzie,<sup>129</sup> and Percy Ridgway,<sup>130</sup> all of whom appeared to share his disquiet over the subordinate position in which Natal found herself, and were urging action to remedy this. In early July 1931, the Home Rule Council was established at a public meeting in Pietermaritzburg. A resolution was passed which expressed somewhat less than Helps had advocated, for it made little mention of secession and was full of jingoist sentiment:

Conscious of the sentiments of the majority of the Natal people, this meeting affirms that it is desirable and imperative to establish for Natal such a status and form of government as will preserve to them for all time their inalienable right of allegiance to their King, flag and language, and their freedom to remain an integral part of the British Empire. Recognising, however, the desire of the peoples of the other provinces of the Union to decide their own destiny; recognising also the differences of opinion and sentiment existing on the question of independence [from the Empire] and higher status, and fearing that such differences must inevitably result in serious racial disagreement, this meeting is of the opinion that no friendly solution of the differences can be found other than by the formation of the federal system of government, ensuring, subject to certain provisions agreed upon before acceptance of the federal system, home rule for each province.<sup>131</sup>

The council attempted to elicit support for the movement by issuing a manifesto in the form of a petition, entitled "Wake up Natal!"<sup>132</sup> In a few days, 10 000

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128. Colonel Edward M Greene, CMG, KC, was a son of the former Dean of Pietermaritzburg and a former Minister of Railways and Harbours in the colonial administration of Natal. He undoubtedly brought a wide experience and influence to the movement. See *Who's Who in Natal*, p. 110; Vickers, "Provincial Councils", p. 243; Edley, "Devolution League", p. 22; Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 76.

129. Robert Elder Macauley Mackenzie (1874-1959) was one of the pioneers of the northern Natal coalfields, in which he still retained a considerable interest. See Vickers, "Provincial Councils", p. 244; Edley, "Devolution League", p. 22; Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 77.

130. Percy Douglas Ridgway was a teacher of "commercial" subjects at various Durban schools and colleges. His proficiency in shorthand made him a useful member of the movement and he was eventually appointed Secretary of the Natal Devolution League. See *Who's Who in Natal*, p. 207; Edley, "Devolution League", p. 22; Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 77.

131. Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 69.

132. *Natal Mercury*, 9 July 1931.

signatures to this had been obtained after tables had been set up in the main streets of Durban to collect them. The police had to be summoned to control the crowds.<sup>133</sup> The movement then gathered strength and in September 1931, the council was re-formed and renamed the Natal Devolution League. This reorganisation appears to have been a response to the perceived threat to Natal's hopes implicit in the legislation under passage through the House of Commons in Britain, which finally emerged as the Statute of Westminster in December 1931. The initial aims of the (NDL) were: "To retain Natal within the Union and the Union within the Empire, and, in furtherance of this policy, strenuously to oppose the passing of the Statute of Westminster, under which Natal's rights would be jeopardised."<sup>134</sup> The NDL were not successful in halting the legislation, or in lobbying the Hertzog government to follow Britain off the gold standard. Thus it appeared that the NDL had moved even more firmly into the imperialist camp.

Beneath the surface, the Durban-based members of the NDL were beginning to exert more influence, perhaps as a consequence of the luke-warm reception accorded the NDL in Pietermaritzburg, where the *Natal Witness* remained opposed, and the local members of parliament remained largely committed to the SAP. Helps, Mackenzie and Ridgway formed a triumvirate in Durban, and began to agitate against the government's handling of the economic crisis, perhaps in an effort to gather support amongst the businessmen and the unemployed of the town. By October 1931, "Wake Up Natal!" had collected 15 000 signatures and Helps was agitating for a "national government" to cope with the depression.<sup>135</sup>

Helps began to suggest that the way out of current difficulties was to hold a "People's Convention" where the people of Natal could express their desires. It was obvious that the stance of the NDL was subtly altering, and that Helps was moving back to his initial point of departure, namely that Natal should first secede and then renegotiate a federal form of association with the rest of South Africa.<sup>136</sup> At a meeting held in the Mayor's Parlour,<sup>137</sup> Helps moved that the time had come to

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133. *Natal Mercury*, 17 July 1931.

134. Thompson, *Natalians*, pp. 70 - 71.

135. See Vickers, "Provincial Councils", pp. 100 - 101.

136. *Natal Mercury*, 17 March 1932.

"get down to business". The following resolution was put to the meeting and enthusiastically accepted:

That this meeting of citizens of Natal fully realising the disastrous undermining of our rights as British subjects and the economic ruin of the Province of Natal, by the Union Government, do hereby declare our intention of separating from the Union, and we hereby resolve to call a Convention of Natal citizens to be held in Maritzburg to consider Natal's relations to the Union and to the Empire, and decide the necessary action to be taken to bring about such separation at the earliest possible date and to devise the means whereby we can enter into a Federal form of Government.<sup>138</sup>

It was resolved to hold a public meeting in Durban to discuss the whole issue. Prior to this meeting, set for 31 March 1932, Helps gave several addresses and interviews, mainly on economic issues. At one of these he was recorded as saying:

Under her own Government, Natal will soon put her house in order. One of our first aims will be to revive our coal industry and create a huge export trade. As our first step will be to come off the Gold Standard and link up with sterling, a big impetus will be given to our four primary industries; coal, wattles, wool and sugar.<sup>139</sup>

Helps also suggested that the railways of Natal should be brought under the proposed new government and would then no longer be used to subsidise less economical branch lines elsewhere in the Union. He pointed out that under the colonial government, the Natal Government Railways "...always paid dividends". "We can give better facilities and cheaper rates", he argued. Railway freight charges, he alleged, had increased by 50 per cent, but efficiency had declined at the same rate.<sup>140</sup>

The meeting on 31 March was a great success. The crowd, between three and five thousand strong, packed into the Durban Town Hall, sang patriotic songs and waved

137. The Mayor of Durban, the Revd A Lamont, was an enthusiastic supporter of the League.

138. *Natal Mercury*, 17 March 1932.

139. *Natal Mercury*, 22 March 1932.

140. *Natal Mercury*, 29 March 1932.

Union Jacks. After addresses by the Mayor, Helps and Colonel Greene, a resolution in favour of secession from the Union was carried unanimously.<sup>141</sup> A similar rapturous reception awaited the League in Pietermaritzburg a week later. There too, the crowd (estimated at over three thousand) passed the secessionist resolution by acclaim.<sup>142</sup> Public meetings were organised in towns all over the province and in most resolutions along the following lines were adopted:

That this meeting of citizens of Natal fully realising the disastrous undermining of our rights as British subjects and the economic ruin of the Province of Natal by the Union Government, do hereby declare our intention of separating from the Union...<sup>143</sup>

By April 1932, 15 out of 16 towns had passed such resolutions. By May, the *Mercury* reported that 27 towns in the province had pledged support, and Helps declared that two-thirds of Natal was with the League.<sup>144</sup>

There can be little doubt that the NDL flourished in the hard times of the depression and that it enjoyed widespread support among disaffected and unemployed whites of the province. The government's adherence to the gold standard and the general economic malaise, contributed to the popularity of the League, as a letter from "Out of Work" illustrates:

Why, therefore, I ask, does South Africa not link with sterling and at least allow money to come back into this financially starved country. The result is obvious, all too obvious, almost utter stagnation in business, bankruptcies galore, and resultant suicides, etc. The next question which arises is, how long must we, the general public, stand it? Unemployment is rife, there is no State relief, and no attempt at any constructional Government policy. In the very near future trouble will start in

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141. See Vickers, "Provincial Councils", pp. 104 and 109; *Natal Mercury*, 1 April 1932.

142. Vickers, "Provincial Councils", pp. 108 - 109.

143. *Natal Mercury*, 17 March 1932.

144. Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 75. In fact, not all the towns had expressed such sentiments. Of the 27 towns, 24 had passed the secessionist resolution, but in the the remaining three (Empangeni, Paulpietersburg and Vryheid) the NDL had run into determined opposition. In the Dundee-Glencoe district an anti-Devolution movement was organised. This would seem to indicate that both sugar and coal interests were against the League, while the predominantly Afrikaner district of Vryheid was naturally opposed to any such "jingoist" movement. See Vickers, "Provincial Councils", p. 162, Fn 71; Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 80.

earnest, no man will stand and watch his wife and kids starve. It is all too plain and too close, to permit one to shut one's eyes to it. Something must be done, and at once, if not by the Government, then by the people. The movement on foot in Natal for Separation is a possible solution for us locally, and will undoubtedly soon be followed by other Provinces. Let us avail ourselves of it, but speed it up and get something achieved.<sup>145</sup>

However, as Thompson correctly pointed out, the movement also fed on fears about the intentions of the Hertzog government towards the future of the provincial councils, and on the tradition of imperialist patriotism.<sup>146</sup> The NDL also exhibited several characteristics common to populist movements elsewhere in the Union<sup>147</sup> and in the world,<sup>148</sup> although in the true sense of the term, the NDL was not a typical populist movement.<sup>149</sup> Nor was it universally popular in Natal. The sugar barons set their minds against it, probably because they feared the loss of government support for their crisis-ridden industry. G N Hulett repudiated the movement on behalf of the sugar planters,<sup>150</sup> while the *SASJ*, which tended to represent the millers rather than the planters was also scathing:

It is not within the province of the *Sugar Journal* to take sides on political questions and it has always refrained from doing so, but when it comes to a matter of superlative importance to the future of Natal and its most important industry, it is incumbent upon us, in response to numerous requests, to express the opinions which we believe will place on record the general attitude of the Sugar Industry towards separation from the Union of South Africa. When the movement first started it was not taken very seriously, but during recent weeks Natal people have expressed themselves in favour of the general

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145. *Natal Mercury*, 19 May 1932.

146. Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 75.

147. See A D Turrell, "The South African Party: The Movement Towards Fusion", M A thesis, University of Natal (Durban), 1977, p. 77, where Turrell writes of the Farmers' and Workers' Bond and the Centre Party, formed in the Union during the depression years: "Common to all these rather bizarre parties was an economic programme populist in character and committed to the abandonment of the Gold Standard."

148. See Edley, "Population", p. 99 for these references.

149. *Ibid.*, pp. 99 - 100. Most truly populist movements have a strong agrarian base, which the NDL was largely lacking. In fact, as will be shown, the strongest opposition to the League came from agricultural interests.

150. Vickers, "Provincial Councils", pp 133 - 135.

principle of some form of separation, popularly described as devolution, but in many public questions the popular view is not always the right one, and is not usually characterised by deep reasoning. Popular feeling is created to a large extent by the utterances of self-constituted leaders who are more actuated by motives more selfish than benevolent, who play upon the feelings of the multitude to serve their own ends...<sup>151</sup>

The motivation behind this attack also emerged clearly further on in the same article:

We can scarcely believe that anybody with sugar interests would be so short-sighted as to favour the separation movement. The Sugar Industry has a lot to thank the Government for, which should be given the credit of being inspired by honesty of purpose and a desire to promote the well-being of the country through its industries: and we will go further and say we believe the Hertzog Ministry has done more for sugar than any of its predecessors in office either before or after Union. The fact that they are ruining the country by their obstinate adherence to the gold standard is another matter and is likewise a matter of considerably varied opinion. The Natal people are just as great racialists as the Dutch in the backveld, and their feelings are being played on by the devolutionist leaders, who are not altogether animated by the purest patriotism. We fail to see how Natal could secede from the Union of South Africa without suffering in a variety of ways: in short, she has everything to lose and nothing to gain, and if she is led away by the hysterical, sentimental nonsense expressed throughout the country during the last few months by certain irresponsible people, it cannot fail to react to her detriment.<sup>152</sup>

The *SASJ* continued to attack Helps and the NDL at every opportunity, and when Helps went so far as to suggest that the population were being "heavily taxed" to support the sugar industry, the *SASJ* said:

If the gentlemen engaged in flogging the Devolution horse are not more sound in their political arguments than they are in their references to sugar, it will be a bad day for Natal if they ever take over the reins of Government, which we are happy to think will never happen, notwithstanding the tumult and the shouting which emanate from the irresponsibles who pack their meetings. Here is a sample of the unadulterated tosh which Mr Helps, the self-constituted leader of the movement delivered a few days ago at Pinetown...<sup>153</sup>

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151. *SASJ*, 30 June 1932, p. 312.

152. *SASJ*, 30 June 1932, p. 313.

Helps was attempting to win support among the planters, for he suggested that any protection afforded the industry should go entirely to the producers of the cane. This strategy was also condemned:

"The Planters have nothing to fear from a Natal Government" says Mr. Helps. We give the Planters full credit for having more than sufficient sense to avoid being led away by the specious arguments of men whose personal ambitions override all other considerations. Natal has everything to lose and nothing to gain by breaking away from the Union, and it is obvious the Sugar Industry would suffer very badly under the parochial Government which the Devolutionists put forward as their ideal.<sup>154</sup>

When it became obvious that the sugar industry as a whole was not prepared to show any sign of support for the NDL, both Helps and Greene launched attacks on the industry, saying it was exploiting the people. Helps accused the industry of being responsible for Natal having joined the Union:

The Sugar Industry has now come out into the open. We can now speak out. You all know that before the National Convention it was the sugar interests in Natal that drove us into Union. They coerced the people 22 years ago, and they are trying to coerce them now to stay in the Union.<sup>155</sup>

As has been shown,<sup>156</sup> Greene even opposed the state assistance being given to the sugar industry, saying:

It gives us no great measure of satisfaction to see a few individuals wax rich at our expense.<sup>157</sup>

Nor was it only sugar interests that opposed the NDL, as R Ellis Brown, Chairman of the Durban Chamber of Commerce, was quoted as saying that Commerce had

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153. SASJ, 31 July 1932, p. 371.

154. *Ibid.*

155. Helps speaking at a meeting in Northdene, as reported in the SASJ, 31 August 1932, p. 453.

156. See Chapter Five.

157. CAD, A32 (Hertzog Papers), F99, Colonel E M Greene (Natal Devolution League) to Hertzog, 7 October 1932.



never regarded the separation of Natal from the Union as a practical possibility. It would place business at a decided disadvantage.<sup>158</sup> *Ilanga* also entered the debate:

Our Natal citizens should know that they cannot have it both ways. If they are now South Africans they must bear up with South African conditions of which the Native is the greatest sufferer than those who are ready to leave the Union on the first occasion of discomfort [*sic*].<sup>159</sup>

Helps appears to have been undaunted by such opposition.

Prior to the convention of the NDL, called to meet in Pietermaritzburg on 31 May 1932, Helps wrote to every sitting member of parliament in the province asking them to commit themselves to devolution and if necessary, to secession.<sup>160</sup> This was a shrewd political move, for it put the SAP, which controlled the majority of Natal seats, in something of a quandary. It was clear that the NDL enjoyed sizable support at the grass-root level in the province. If sitting MPs pronounced against the NDL or its aims and objectives, such a pronouncement might very well count against them in future nomination contests or in the next election. On the other hand, however, the members of parliament were subject to party rules and discipline and the leader of the SAP, General Smuts, was not favourably disposed to the NDL's plans, or even to the idea of federalism. The MPs were damned if they did and damned if they did not.

At a meeting of Natal MPs it was decided to leave the question of replies up to individual members. Worried that the SAP in Natal might be eclipsed by the NDL, Heaton Nicholls attempted to curry favour with the NDL by taking the issue to the full SAP caucus. He won grudging permission to journey to Natal to see what could be salvaged.<sup>161</sup> After considerable negotiation, it appeared that Heaton Nicholls had been successful in forging a *modus vivendi* with the NDL, for the Natal Convention of the NDL was fairly mild in its approach to the party.

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158. Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 80.

159. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 1 April 1932.

160. Vickers, "Provincial Councils", p. 187.

161. Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 83.

The 53 delegates to the convention from 24 towns in the province, represented a fairly broad spectrum of white public opinion in the province, for among the delegates were civic leaders, businessmen, lawyers, doctors and farmers.<sup>162</sup> The convention affirmed the need for a devolution of power to the province and justified separation from the Union on the grounds that it would achieve this.<sup>163</sup> Committees on Legal Affairs, Finance, Native Affairs and General Purposes were elected, with mandates to investigate and report back on the implications of separation at the next sitting of the convention.<sup>164</sup>

The conciliatory tone adopted by the convention towards the SAP led to the formation of a loose alliance between the Natal faction of that party (the so-called federal group, headed by Heaton Nicholls) and the NDL. However, the SAP appeared to believe that by forming such an alliance, the NDL had changed its stance on secession, a notion which was angrily disavowed by Helps.<sup>165</sup> In the event, the association of the SAP with the NDL was terminated by Smuts himself, who repudiated the idea of devolution of power by declaring that "federation is not the policy of the party". He further stated that the SAP would not tolerate any distinct federal group within the party, and that if members could not adhere to the party line, they were welcome to amicably part company with the SAP and form their own party.<sup>166</sup> Smuts had chosen his time well, for Heaton Nicholls was overseas attending the Ottawa Conference, and the remainder of the "federal group" did not have his determination. Most came promptly to heel when the party whip was cracked.<sup>167</sup>

It appears that despite the importance of the Natal caucus of the SAP to the party,

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162. See Natal Devolution League, *Report of the Natal Convention*, Durban, 1932, for a list of delegates.

163. Thompson, *Natalians*, pp. 84 - 85.

164. Edley, "Devolution", pp. 56 - 57.

165. *Ibid.*, pp. 86 - 87.

166. Vickers, "Provincial Councils", pp. 183 - 185; *Ilanga lase Natal*, 1 July 1932.

167. Thompson, *Natalians*, pp. 89 - 90. Several MPs in the "federal group" did not recant. These included Marwick, Borlase, V L Nicoll and Richards.

Smuts was not prepared to tolerate any *imperium in imperio*. He admitted the right of Natal members to advocate federation, but declared that this could not be maintained contrary to the wishes of the party as a whole. This decision meant that no official support would be forthcoming from the SAP, and that instead of finding increasing common ground, the SAP and the NDL were fast becoming political opponents. The whip-cracking was not well received and popular support for the convention and the NDL remained. However, under the pressure of rejection, splits began to appear within the convention, with Col Greene wanting a closer association with the SAP and Helps angrily repudiating Smuts, calling him Natal's greatest enemy. It appears that even amongst rank and file members of the SAP, the idea of secession and devolution had not died out, for at the provincial congress of the SAP in October 1932, several resolutions calling for one or the other were tabled.<sup>168</sup>

The congress was also asked to consider a compromise, largely aimed at preventing an outright split in the SAP between pro- and anti-devolutionists, which had been developed by Felix Hollander. The Hollander Memorandum laid down, *inter alia*, that the rights of the provinces should be entrenched in the constitution, and was overwhelmingly endorsed by the congress.<sup>169</sup> Helps and Mackenzie visited Smuts on his farm at Irene in an effort to get the SAP to withdraw their candidate in the forthcoming provincial by-election in Greyville, where the Revd Lamont, a firm supporter of the NDL, was standing as an independent home rule candidate. They were unsuccessful. Lamont was none the less elected by a slender majority of 44 votes. Although this victory showed that the devolution movement was able to win electoral support, the character and personality of Lamont himself contributed in large measure to his success.<sup>170</sup>

Lamont's victory gave added impetus to the campaign for the formation of a political party to fight for Natal's rights. Greene was opposed to this idea, preferring collaboration with the SAP under the terms of the Hollander Memorandum, while the more militant members of the NDL, including Helps and Mackenzie, favoured the formation of a "Natal Party". This disagreement resulted in the expulsion of

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168. G H Nicholls, *South Africa in My Time*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1961, p. 247.

169. Thompson, *Natalians*, pp. 93 - 94.

170. *Ibid.*, pp. 95 - 96.

Helps and Mackenzie from the NDL.<sup>171</sup> Despite all Helps's earlier protestations that the NDL should be an apolitical movement, and his considerable misgivings about party government,<sup>172</sup> he went on to form the Natal Devolution Home Rule Party.<sup>173</sup> The parting of the ways took place amid acrimony as Helps was successfully sued by Greene for the return of documents he had taken from the NDL's offices.<sup>174</sup> The entire devolution movement was in disarray and had split into three distinct factions; Helps' Home Rule Party, Greene's NDL and the Federal League, based in Port Shepstone, under Major Knox-Gore.<sup>175</sup>

The sudden announcement of the formation of a coalition between the SAP and NP, and an impending general election, thus caught the entire "Natal Movement" unprepared and deeply divided.<sup>176</sup> Although there is no direct evidence that this was a factor in the government's decision to go to the country so soon after the formation of the coalition, there can be no doubt that the swift arrival of the ultimate test of the "Natal Movement's" electoral strength was serendipitous for the SAP-NP alliance (especially for the SAP component of it).<sup>177</sup> The SAP took the opportunity to rid itself of some of the "troublesome" federalists in its ranks and refused renomination for four of them: Borlase (Umbilo), Anderson (Klip River), Acutt (Umlazi) and Major G R Richards (Greyville).<sup>178</sup> Heaton Nicholls's seat was not contested. The Home Rule Party led by Helps put up five candidates (all in the Durban region) and gave support to a further five "Home Rulers" contesting seats elsewhere in the province.<sup>179</sup>

The Home Rule Party only won two seats, both in Durban, where separatist sentiment was greatest. The Durban (Greyville) constituency was won by Mr J G

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171. *Natal Mercury*, 11 January 1933.

172. See Helps, *Imperial British Empire*, pp. 17ff.

173. *Natal Mercury*, 14 January 1933.

174. *Natal Mercury*, 9 February 1933. Exactly what these documents were is unknown.

175. Edley, "Population", p. 101; Thompson, *Natalians*, pp. 101 - 102.

176. Thompson, "Province", p. 3.

177. Turrell, "Movement", p. 123.

178. *Natal Mercury*, 13 April 1933.

179. Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 104. Interestingly, Helps did not stand as a candidate.

Derbyshire, while Mr S S Sutton won the Durban (Umlazi) seat.<sup>180</sup> While the election had proved that the SAP was still the dominant party in the province and that the coalition with the NP was generally popular, the SAP had no room for complacency. As Thompson pointed out, only 32,2 per cent of the valid votes cast were for the SAP. Had the Natal Movement been better organised at a constituency level, it might very well have fared far better, for some of its candidates put up good showings.<sup>181</sup>

The tenuous alliance of the "Natal Movement" disintegrated after the election. While the Home Rule Party under Helps soldiered bravely on, Greene's faction of the Devolution League joined the Coalition Union to form the Provincial Government Union; within a month this grouping joined with Knox-Gore's Federal League and another minor grouping to form the Provincial Party, under the leadership of Major G R Richards and Major R E J Kay.<sup>182</sup> This Provincial Party was to prove a significant force in the provincial council elections held in August 1933. The Provincial Party had the same basic goals as the "Natal Movement"; it stood for the preservation of the uniquely English character of Natal.<sup>183</sup> Despite the fact that the depression was on the wane, the party continued to make economics one of the key elements of its platform. It stood for

a policy of Justice for all classes, the adoption of unemployment and disability insurance, and the pushing forward of a scheme..having for its object the provision of congenial employment under attractive and healthy conditions, as being the only solution of what has now become a great National problem, viz. unemployment.<sup>184</sup>

The party supported the "civilised labour" policy, as the following statement indicates:

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180. Union of South Africa, *Government Gazette No. 2117*, 2 June 1933, p. 352.

181. Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 105.

182. *Natal Mercury*, 29 May 1933.

183. *Natal Mercury*, 13 November 1933.

184. *Natal Mercury*, 12 November 1933. This is an extract from the manifesto of Edgar Ashburner, who stood as a Provincial Party candidate in the Umbilo Parliamentary by-election of that month. It is the fullest account of the Party's principles and aims still extant.

[The Party] is opposed...to employing Europeans at miserable rates of pay, compelling them to herd together in slums and live under uncivilized conditions. The object and policy of [the] Party is to foster South African Industries and Agriculture, and by such and other means to provide sufficient employment in circumstances which will make our people and their children happy and contented members of our community.<sup>185</sup>

In the August provincial council elections, the Home Rule Party put up five candidates, while the Provincial Party fought eleven contests. The former retained its Greyville seat, won by Lamont the previous year, and also gained Durban North West, Mr R D Lavery winning this by 72 votes.<sup>186</sup> The Provincial Party fared far better, winning the following Durban contests: Berea (Col T H Blew), Central (Major Kay), Gardens (Mr W S Payne), Point (Mr V L Shearer) and Toll Gate (Mr C H Stott). Most of the strength of the anti-SAP vote lay in the greater Durban region. The Labour Party also won the Congella seat, further reducing the SAP majority. In total, the SAP garnered only 43,5 per cent of the total vote, significantly less than the 59,2 per cent it had enjoyed in 1930, a year in which only 11 of the 25 seats had been contested, the rest being retained unopposed by the SAP.<sup>187</sup> It is quite clear that had there been more time available to the Provincial Party, and had the level of organisation been greater, the party would have fared far better.<sup>188</sup> It is also undeniable that had some sort of election pact been effected between the Home Rule Party and the Provincial Party, further seats would have been won.<sup>189</sup> After the election, the "Natal Movement" was briefly united in the Democratic Party. It was unlikely that another opportunity to gain elected office would arise in the next few years: the great opportunity had been lost.<sup>190</sup>

There can be little doubt that the "Natal Movement" did dominate the political scene

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185. *Natal Mercury*, 13 November 1933.

186. Province of Natal, *Official Gazette of the Province of Natal*, No. 1333, Provincial Notice No. 388 dated 30 August 1933, pp. 80 - 81.

187. Edley, "Population", p. 103.

188. Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 106.

189. Edley, "Population", p. 103.

190. Thompson, *Natalians*, p. 107.

in Natal during the depression years. The depression was not responsible for this upsurge in "jingoist" sentiment, but it certainly provided sufficient economic grounds to sustain and enhance the movement's popularity. The leadership made constant reference to the state of depression prevailing in the province, and to the unprecedented level of white unemployment in the major urban areas. The unemployed, cleverly drawn in by the leaders of virtually every movement in the province, were clearly disenchanted with the lack of attention being paid to their needs by the Hertzog government. Many saw the government as not only remote from them, but as actively working against their interests through the maintenance of the gold standard and through not affording them effective assistance in their hour of greatest need. Ordinary Natalians, fiercely proud of their British heritage, and fearful of Afrikanerisation, looked with horror upon the steps being taken to loosen ties to the British Empire. The Provincial Councils issue seemed to simply be a further step along the path to the imposition of absolute control from Pretoria which, in the light of their current situation, was anathema.

There is also little doubt that although the NDL and others of that ilk were sincere in preaching secession, they had only the vaguest idea of the economic repercussions; their zeal was matched only by the impracticality of the notion of secession. Natal simply could not "go it alone", despite all that the NDL argued. When this was pointed out to the leadership, they reacted by angrily turning on the "spoilers". The chief reason for the failure of the "Natal Movement" was the fact that even had the movement gained sufficient electoral support, this would have been entirely inadequate to bring about secession. Secession could only really be gained through the medium of the NP or the SAP, neither of which was disposed to grant it.

The NDL and its sister movements did have an impact on the political fortunes of the major political party in the province. The SAP bore the brunt of the disaffection with existing political parties which was rife in the province. Attempts to draw the SAP into the "Natal Movement" were ultimately thwarted by Smuts and, despite having its majority threatened, the party emerged bloody but unbowed from the struggle with the secessionists. The amount of support that the movement did manage to garner is, nevertheless, significant. With slicker party machinery and

finer organisational abilities, they might have fared even better. The formation of the coalition between the SAP and the NP, and the consequent fusion of the two parties, rendered the "Natal Movement" insignificant. With a huge majority in parliament, the United Party was able to dominate and the elected Home Rulers found themselves starved of speaking time to press their case.

Looking at all the developments in white politics in Natal during the depression years, it is not difficult to see the influence that economic issues had on the body politic at that time. The growth of "extremist" movements (here excluding the NDL and its affiliates for the moment) must be seen as a partial result of the economic pressure that the white population was experiencing. While these movements gained little electoral support, the fact that they came into existence at this time and briefly flourished, must be seen as significant. It is equally true, however, that although Natal suffered greatly from the evil consequences of the depression, the economic system had not failed on the same massive scale as, for example, Germany's had, thereby bringing Hitler to power. It also seems that, while people were prepared to attend meetings and voice their unhappiness, they were not prepared to back their vocal support with their votes. The right wing were spectacularly unsuccessful at all levels of political electioneering in the province. Natal's experience in this regard was by no means unique, for in the rest of the western world, also bowed under the effects of the depression, many similar occurrences were recorded.

Nor were the socialists and their allies much more successful. Although numbers of them were elected to public office, the more radical were spurned by the electorate in favour of the moderates. The disarray of the Labour Party at a national level indubitably also contributed to this state of affairs, and it appears that many of those who achieved election did so on the strength of their personal qualities rather than their affiliation to a particular party. The fact that most of them supported the interests of white workers also assisted them in the working-class areas which they tended to represent.

A great drawback to any study of the political life of the province at this time is the lack of adequate records. Hardly any documentation relating directly either to the



"fringe" movements or the NDL could be traced, despite extensive searches. The only accessible information exists in the papers and records of other persons and organisations and in the newspapers. The inevitable result of this is that a complete picture is impossible to obtain. Until such materials are uncovered (if indeed they existed), all findings must remain merely provisional.

The other interesting facet of political history at this time is how relatively divorced white political activity appears to have been from its black counterpart. The political life of Africans (and to a much lesser extent that of Indians) hardly raised a ripple of interest after 1931. Yet, as is obvious, the fortunes of all the population groups were intertwined, as will be shown in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER TEN

### THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT OF BLACK POLITICS IN NATAL DURING THE DEPRESSION YEARS

The period of the 1920s was characterised by increasing political activity among Natal's African population. In both rural and urban areas, African political movements were remarkably successful. Not in terms of what was ultimately achieved, but in the mobilisation of many thousands of Natal Africans, for the first time since Union, into organised mass movements which sought the amelioration of the pitiful conditions under which they lived and laboured.<sup>1</sup> The success of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) and its breakaway Natal branch, the ICU *yase* Natal, can be cited as an example of this, as can the rapid growth of the Communist Party in Durban between 1929 and 1930. Towards the end of the decade the mood among Africans throughout the province became more militant.

This political activity led, inevitably, to conflict with the white state. It culminated in two bloody confrontations in the main urban centre of the province during 1929 and 1930, leaving the face of black politics in the province and the entire Union changed forever.<sup>2</sup> To many whites, it appeared that the *swart gevaar* chimera, so often glibly invoked to political advantage by conservative politicians, had taken flesh to confound its fabricators. The ghosts of Langalibalele and Bambatha roamed the land once more, and the spectre of bloody uprisings had been raised to haunt the tranquillity of the garden province. Bolstered by their victory in the 1929 general election (which had, rather serendipitously, been fought on the issue of the "Native Question") the ruling National Party government acted quickly to bolster the local authorities, using the might of the state to counteract and quell any nascent "uprising". Once the immediate danger had been averted, the state set about devising strategies to defuse the situation. Yet even as these strategies were in the process of being implemented, the perceived "danger" receded somewhat and the mood of militancy and confrontation dissipated. This phenomenon has puzzled

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1. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom*, p. 2.

2. See Hemson, "Dockworkers"; P La Hausse, "Struggle", pp. 171 - 240; T A Nuttall, "Class", pp. 50 - 85.

many historians and has yet to be satisfactorily explained.

It is not the aim of this chapter to detail and analyse all black political activity in Natal, for recent work has already focused attention on this.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the reaction of the white authorities to black political activity in this period will also be but briefly discussed. Rather, this chapter seeks to provide a fuller understanding of the socio-economic context in which African political activity took place. By highlighting the economic crisis, occasioned by the depression and drought, during the period 1929-1933 and showing how it contributed to the decline of political activity in the period after 1930, it will, hopefully, shed new light on a sequence of events which has hitherto been largely unexplained.

To begin this explanation, it is worth emphasising the uncertainties endured by Africans as they were harried from pillar to post in the name of the segregationist policy followed by the Hertzog government.<sup>4</sup> This policy was designed to secure migrant labour and saw Africans as "temporary sojourners" in the urban areas, "ministering to the white man's needs", for as long as they were required, after which they were expected to return to the rural areas from whence they had come. African labour would thus remain cheap and essentially unskilled. The system hinged upon maintaining a healthy surplus of workers in the urban areas, which would continue to depress wage levels, without creating a situation in which too great a surplus could become a threat to the existing privileged positions of whites. It is obvious that control of the African workforce was essential if this delicate balance was to be maintained. This involved not only controlling the influx and efflux of Africans to and from the urban areas, but also monitoring practically every facet of the lives of Africans (even while only temporarily resident) in the urban areas.<sup>5</sup> To the official mind it seemed:

...only right that it should be understood that the town is a European area in which there is no place for the redundant native, who neither works nor serves his or her people, but

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3. See for example Marks, *The Ambiguities*; La Hausse, "Ethnicity"; La Hausse, "Struggle".
  4. See *Ilanga lase Natal*, 12 February 1932.
  5. Maylam, "Strategies", pp. 3 - 4.

forms the class from which the professional agitators, the slum landlords, the liquor sellers, the prostitutes and other undesirable classes spring. The exclusion of these redundant natives is in the interests of Europeans and Natives alike.<sup>6</sup>

The process of maintaining control has been well documented elsewhere<sup>7</sup> and it is not necessary to detail it again here; suffice it to say that if efficiently implemented, the measures were designed to deliver both the cheap labour and the security that the privileged elite considered essential. By the late 1920s, however, the system was showing signs of stress both from within and without: the pressure from the rural areas was growing ever greater as the reserves became less able to support both man and beast; while in the urban areas, some employers of African labour were beginning to see the advantages of a more settled and permanent workforce which would save transport and training costs. The result was that by the time of the Great Depression, there were already many thousands of Africans living in the urban areas of the Union on a permanent or semi-permanent basis. Natal was no exception to this.<sup>8</sup> For a variety of reasons, not least of which was the lack of a proper "native village",<sup>9</sup> it was in Durban that the seriousness of the situation which had been allowed to develop manifested itself in spectacular fashion in the Beer Hall riots of June 1929.<sup>10</sup>

Once the riots had been quelled and the imminent threat to the existing order had been temporarily averted, the authorities at both local and central government level began to institute procedures aimed at preventing a recurrence. It is possible to argue that the Beer Hall riots reinforced in the "official mind" the already established connection between an excessive surplus of African labour and lawlessness. The actions of the authorities in the aftermath of the riots would appear to substantiate this contention. A series of lightning raids were conducted by a mobile contingent of policemen specially brought to Durban for the purpose by the Minister of Justice, Oswald Pirow. Pass offenders, tax defaulters and other

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6. Davenport, "Urban Segregation", p. 14.

7. La Hausse, "Struggle"; Maylam, "Strategies".

8. See Edley, "Population", pp. 7 - 8.

9. Durban's first "Native Village" or urban location, Lamont, was only settled in 1934.

10. The seminal work on this is La Hausse, "Struggle".

miscreants were summarily dealt with; specially constituted courts sat long hours to process the offenders. The raids were designed to have a "wholesome moral effect" upon the African population.<sup>11</sup> This they certainly did, at least from the authorities' point of view, for some £5 000 in arrear taxes were paid within a few days.<sup>12</sup>

The government was not content with a single demonstration of force; not only was the increased police presence in the town maintained for some time, but the state sought further powers from the Union parliament. Discussion of both the Riotous Assemblies (Amendment) Bill and the Natives (Urban Areas) (Amendment) Bill in the course of the sitting of 1930 show quite clearly that the Beer Hall riots and the agitator thesis associated with this continued to plague the minds of MPs. Oswald Pirow said:

Recent events have made it quite clear that the position has not improved since the time the original Bill was before the House for a second reading. The position has now become aggravated and without being alarmist, I must state definitely that, unless steps are taken, as soon as possible, to put onto the statute book some measures which will adequately cope with these agitators among Natives, within six months we shall have to face the position that in many of our big centres we shall have a state of affairs which can only be compared to the position in Durban before law and order was established there...<sup>13</sup>

Heaton Nicholls went even further when he said: "...the Native population of this country has got out of hand...",<sup>14</sup> but it was left to the arch-segregationist, Colonel C F Stallard to make the connection plain:

One of the facts which are outstanding in these circumstances is that the fuel which the agitators work on is mainly supplied from dense population. The fuel for the agitators comes from those who are unemployed, or those who are only temporarily employed, or the tott workers referred to by the Hon. Member for Pietermaritzburg (North) [Mr Deane]. If you were to remove these elements from the urban areas, you would take away the fuel, and the agitator would have nothing left to work

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11. *Natal Mercury*, 15 November 1929.

12. *Natal Mercury*, 20 November 1929.

13. House of Assembly Debates (hereafter Hansard), Col. 2152, 20 March 1930.

14. Hansard, Cols. 2346 - 2347, 26 March 1930.

upon. Before you take these arbitrary powers, you should do what you can to remove the redundant Natives from urban and densely settled areas. You have got the opportunity now in the Urban Areas Bill which is now before the House.<sup>15</sup>

Although, according to Mr A Eaton (Durban County), all the Natal MPs were "...heartily in agreement with the Minister on the principle of the Bill...",<sup>16</sup> some of the more draconian powers in the Riotous Assemblies (Amendment) Bill were unacceptable to them. Heaton Nicholls, however, summed up the attitude of the Natal members when he said: "I am prepared to accept this Bill rather than have no Bill at all."<sup>17</sup> Both bills were passed and government ministers were given sweeping additional powers to deal with agitators by banning (deporting) them, by preventing meetings and by prohibiting the distribution of books, pamphlets or newspapers calculated to have the effect of "inciting racial hatred". Furthermore, government was empowered to remove from the urban areas all Africans declared to be "idle, dissolute and disorderly". The entry of African women into the urban areas was also made more difficult.

Nor did the government long delay in using these newly conferred powers. The leader of the ICU *yase Natal*, A W G Champion, was ordered to leave Durban or face prosecution.<sup>18</sup> It was hoped that by removing Champion from the political scene in Durban the volatile situation in the entire province would return to normal. It is now commonly accepted that Champion was not exiled because of his role in the Beer Hall riots which, as Cope and Marks<sup>19</sup> have shown, was an ambiguous and vacillating one, but as a result of a brief flirtation with the fount of rural power in the province, the Zulu king, Solomon kaDinuzulu.<sup>20</sup> Exiling Champion was a miscalculation, for it created a vacuum which the more militant Communist Party was not slow to exploit. The Communist Party organised a pass-burning campaign which culminated in a mass meeting on 16 December 1930. After a series of fiery

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15. Hansard, Col. 2414, 27 March 1930. Stallard was speaking during the debate on the Riotous Assemblies (Amendment) Bill.

16. Hansard, Col. 757, 15 February 1930.

17. Hansard, Col. 2350, 26 March 1930.

18. E Roux, *Time Longer than Rope*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, reprint 1978, p. 246.

19. Cope, *To Bind the Nation*, p. 252; Marks, *Ambiguities*, p. 7.

20. Cope, *To Bind the Nation*, pp. 251 - 252.

speeches, a fracas with local police ensued during which a number of Africans, including Johannes Nkosi, the leader of the party in the town, were killed.<sup>21</sup> Further repressive measures followed and other communists were exiled.<sup>22</sup>

However, not all measures aimed at containing the situation were directly repressive; it was also clear that the "unrest" in Natal was one of the prime reasons for the government's appointment of the Native Economic Commission. In urging such an investigation, the influential SAP MP, Patrick Duncan said:

I am glad that the Minister frankly realises that all our difficulties with the Natives at this moment are not due to agitation. There are economic difficulties and grievances on the part of the Native which have also got to be enquired into and, as far as possible, remedied. After all, these wild doctrines find acceptance in the minds of the people very largely according to how the seedbed is prepared for them...<sup>23</sup>

At the local level, the town council sought to defuse further militancy by a whole host of paternalistic measures. Acting on the advice of Mr Justice De Waal, the chairman of the judicial commission of enquiry into the Beer Hall riots, the town council instituted a Native Advisory Board (NAB) to provide an avenue of controlled communication between Africans and the local state. The council also appointed a Native Welfare Officer and began a programme of action aimed at lowering the level of militancy by providing other, "more healthy", leisure time activities such as sport and entertainment. Not all the measures instituted by the local state were of this nature, some could certainly be termed repressive: the curfew for Africans was re-instituted; the applicability of the Urban Areas Act was extended several times to encompass almost all of Durban; and the boundary of the town was extended in 1932 by provincial ordinance to enclose several bordering areas. The lack of significant control over the lives of the people who inhabited these border areas was the prime motivating factor for their incorporation into the borough. The borough police were several times instructed to "clean up the

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21. Hemson, "Dockworkers", p. 261.

22. Amongst them Eddie Roux. *Natal Mercury*, 19 December 1931. Roux appealed to the Supreme Court, but lost his appeal and was forced to leave the town in February 1932.

23. Hansard, Col. 742, 13 March 1930.

borough", by conducting pass and liquor raids, and to expel "undesirables". This was done on a regular basis throughout the period. Those Africans who had participated in the pass-burning campaign, or who had refused to pay tax, were especially vulnerable and liable to deportation if caught.

Yet the impact of all these measures may be seen to have been not all that significant; they did not entirely prevent militancy and it was still possible for a crowd of some six thousand Africans to gather fairly close to the centre of Durban and listen to anti-white speeches,<sup>24</sup> nor did they significantly hamper political activity — the exile of Champion and other leaders and the death of Nkosi might have removed significant role players from the political scene, but political activity among Africans did not entirely cease. Even the conservative Congress leader, John Dube, became more and more strident about the injustices being perpetrated against Africans after 1930, and some of the articles published in *Ilanga lase Natal* were highly critical of the white regime. Similarly, his public evidence before the NEC might easily be interpreted as provocative and inflammatory. However, Dube's position was always ambiguous and self-serving. When it suited him to be critical of the radicals he could be scathing,<sup>25</sup> but at other times his own actions could be said to have amounted to incitement to revolt. The activities of the Communist Party, while hampered, were not entirely quashed, as their involvement in the dockworkers' strike of 1932 clearly illustrates.

Nor did similar measures elsewhere in the province have more effect; the boycott of municipal brewed beer was sustained throughout most of the province during the depression years, much to the chagrin of those local authorities which had come to depend on the revenue to fund the administrative machinery which controlled the lives of Africans. The evidence of L H Greene, given before the NEC in Pietermaritzburg, also shows that political activity in the provincial capital had not been significantly affected.<sup>26</sup> Greene said that he had attended and addressed

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24. On 16 December 1930.

25. See for example *Ilanga lase Natal*, 5 December 1930: "The Communists are hysterical about what they intend doing for Natives in December during Dingaan's Day. What they really mean is difficult to understand. If the Natives are silly fools enough to do as these people suggest there will be bloodshed again and hundreds of Natives will be killed or injured...The White Communists know this perfectly well..."

26. Greene was also active in white politics in Pietermaritzburg. See Chapter Nine.



several meetings of Africans, and had found them to be very similar to those organised by whites in that they were convened to discuss measures aimed at alleviating the distress caused by unemployment. These meetings were generally fairly calm, but there had been "...some [who] say bloodshed is the only answer". He hastened to add, "These sir, are not professional agitators, these are people who are feeling the burdon [*sic*] of depression..." Sometimes discussions became more heated:

...occasionally, at a meeting, a native will rush in, come to the table, thump the table and say, 'There is nothing for it but the assegai' and then he will run away...<sup>27</sup>

Greene also testified to the fact that "Kaffer beer" was openly discussed at meetings of the proletariat<sup>28</sup> and that Africans were "...well aware of their bondage and ... waking out of it..<sup>29</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed by Mr Richard Stevens, Superintendent of Native Affairs in the city, when he told the NEC that he did not allow "Native agitators" to use municipal facilities such as halls for meetings, as Africans were using such forums to encourage the boycott of municipal beer halls and "...even urging them [Africans] to violence..."<sup>30</sup> Nor were conditions in the rural areas around the city any better, as one farmer told the NEC:

Now I say that Communist preachings in Natal are rife today and I am right up against communistic preaching because it will simply lead to trouble in the future, and I do feel that it will bring about bloodshed and I should like to see the government take up a strong attitude and put a stop to this.<sup>31</sup>

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27. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Lawrence Henry Haughton Greene, Pietermaritzburg, 9 April 1931, pp. 6591 - 6593.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 6603. This was Greene's own terminology.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 6593.

30. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Richard Edward Stevens, Pietermaritzburg, 10 April 1931, pp. 6750 - 6751.

31. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Robert John Speirs, Pietermaritzburg, 10 April 1931, pp. 6584 - 6585. Speirs also related a story about two "Kaffer girls" preaching the destruction of pigs in his district. If the pigs were not destroyed, "...the lightening [*sic*] would come and it would strike the pig and the pig would run about with fire in its mouth and burn all the kraals. These emissaries were really sent by the ICU..." The emissaries were also reputed to have a talking cow, which was supposed to speak and warn the people. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom*, pp. 228 - 230, discusses the significance of these "millenarian" phenomena.

The Magistrate of Port Shepstone stated that "...communism has been at work here, and very much so..."<sup>32</sup> The Revd Kumalo claimed that economic forces were promoting militancy:

The immorality among the Natives is due to the fact that they are all in want. They are all in want of money. That naturally results in Natives going off and becoming riotous...<sup>33</sup>

This is, however, exactly what Africans did not do. There are no records of significant militant action after the Dingaan's Day débâcle of 1930 — even the highly politicised dockworkers who were driven to strike action by the deterioration of their working conditions in 1932, were relatively mild in their demands and meek when dismissed. Little violence (beyond intimidation) took place and there were no major confrontations with the police.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, a call by the Communist Party in 1931 for a boycott of the poll tax and exhortations to keep alive the "spirit of Johannes Nkosi" fell on deaf ears.<sup>35</sup> The introduction of further exploitative measures by the harbour authorities, after the unsuccessful strike of 1932,<sup>36</sup> also led only to "go slows", despite attempts to broaden and intensify the struggle against such measures.<sup>37</sup>

African political activity, and especially militant action, did decline significantly after 1930. This fact was noted and deplored even by contemporaries, as the following *Ilanga lase Natal* editorial entitled "Twenty years of Congress and little progress" illustrates:

We hardly know to what we are to ascribe the blame for this lack of activity and of results, whether it is the fault of the leaders or of the masses. We believe it is the former...Some incapables and ne'er-do-wells have aspired to positions of

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32. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of R D Lyle, Port Shepstone, 7 October 1930, p. 2100.

33. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of the Revd Alfred Kumalo, Ixopo, 9 October 1930, p. 2229.

34. Hemson, "Dockworkers", pp. 274 - 277.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 268.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 279.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 281.

leadership, some of them round blocks in square holes with the result we see shaming us...<sup>38</sup>

Nor was this the first time that an article critical of African leadership had been published in *Ilanga*. Earlier in 1932, J H Masanganye had contributed an article entitled "The Problem of Bantu Leadership", in which he claimed that leaders were "too divided", "selfish" and "pompous". This, he claimed, had led to the "sudden standstill of their organisations" and there was "no reason yet given for their silence".<sup>39</sup>

It must be accepted that the fragmentation of African opposition during the depression years could have been a contributing factor to the decline of militancy. Political point-scoring and infighting between the various factions, whether Dube's Natal Native Congress, the African National Congress, the ICU *yase* Natal or the rural elite, did help to deflect some attention away from the struggle against the white authorities, as each organisation was pursuing its own agenda in its own way. Furthermore, the personal aspirations of the various leaders also led to fragmentation, and in some ways the situation did warrant the criticisms voiced in the pages of *Ilanga*. It is worth pointing out, however, that such fragmentation was neither new nor confined to the depression period; almost all African organisations existed and engaged in rivalry prior to the depression, and most survived it. Thus to attribute the diminution of political activity to the existence and squabbling of a variety of African political movements would be simplistic. The frustration expressed in the pages of *Ilanga* and elsewhere was, in many ways, similar to the criticisms voiced by disenchanted and frustrated white citizens against their own political leadership. It may be posited that such criticism was a feature of the depression, a thread of commonality running through a divided society.

This still leaves the explanation for the relative decline of African militancy after 1930 incomplete. It is only through a proper socio-economic contextualisation of the political climate in Natal that a satisfactory explanation may be arrived at. To that end it is necessary to bring together the disparate threads of the arguments and evidence presented in earlier chapters, but before doing so it is essential to define the unique position held by Africans in Natal society.

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38. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 23 December 1932.

Most Africans were in some way affected by the twin evils of the depression and drought as they, of all the peoples of Natal, had "twin identities". Almost all inhabited divided worlds; one part of their lives belonged to the world of the urban areas where many worked as migrant labourers (or increasingly by the 1930s, as permanent employees), and the other part to the rural areas (white farms or reserves) where they were based and their families resided, or where they held land. Even the most urbanised had some ties, no matter how tenuous, with the rural areas. Ties of blood, friendship or land linked the African inhabitants of urban and rural areas in a complex web. Often, this relationship was not established out of choice, but was forced upon them: Africans had to obtain paid employment, mainly in the urban areas, in order to earn cash to pay their taxes and support their families. Sometimes Africans chose to live on a semi-permanent basis in the urban areas, but this did not mean that they severed all ties with the rural areas. Even if they chose to cut themselves off, their families remained in the rural areas; they were tied into a web of both support and responsibility. There was always some degree of movement between the two worlds and the interaction brought the two closer together; the trials and tribulations of one part affected the other. It is thus necessary, if one is to attempt to sketch the effects of the depression on Africans, to present a composite of both rural and urban conditions and not to see the parts as discrete entities.<sup>40</sup>

Yet there is very little alternative for the historian, unless one chooses to trace the careers of individuals as they moved between the urban and rural areas.<sup>41</sup> In writing a general overview, however, this strategy cannot successfully be employed. So despite the stated need to present a complete picture, encompassing both "worlds" as perceived and experienced by Africans, for convenience and manageability, the two worlds have had to be examined separately.

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39. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 26 February 1932.

40. Recent writers on Natal, especially La Hausse and Cope, have stressed this point. See for example P la Hausse, "The Dispersal of the Regiments: African Popular Protest in Durban, 1930", *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, Vol. 10, 1987, p. 89: "In Natal during the late twenties and early thirties town and countryside were part of a single complex reality."

41. This is precisely what La Hausse has done in his study of Lamula and Maling.

By the close of the 1920s, most Africans in Natal were in a parlous economic state. With few exceptions, the majority of the population of both the urban and rural areas had been exploited to the level of impoverishment. They were certainly unable to rely on any reserves of economic strength to see them through the traumas occasioned by the depression and drought of the early 1930s. Similarly, the comforting, segregationist *idée fixe* that Africans could simply move back to the rural areas from which they had come when their labour was no longer required in the urban areas has also been shown to have been an impossibility during the depression years. Lacey argued that this fact came as something of a shock to the government:

The NEC's startling revelations on the reserves must certainly have entered into this. They described the dustbowl conditions of most areas in the reserves and tied these conditions to the uncontrolled influx of landless Africans to the towns, bypassing mines and farms. It must have shocked Hertzog and other committee members who, as late as 1930, had insisted that the reserves had room enough to take the 'redundant' population from the town.<sup>42</sup>

Those Africans who were labour tenants on white farms in the rural areas of the province were particularly vulnerable during the depression years. They were often faced either with the threat of eviction, or with a deterioration of their working and living conditions, as cash-poor white farmers desperately tried to remain on their land by wringing every penny they could from it.<sup>43</sup> In many cases this meant putting tenants' land under wattle or other crops, restricting grazing and the size of tenants' herds and, ultimately, demanding longer hours of service from the entire family, not just those initially contracted for. The evidence obtained by the NEC from the rural areas of northern Natal bears witness to the drastic deterioration in conditions there.<sup>44</sup> So exploitative and unsatisfactory were these new conditions seen to be<sup>45</sup>

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42. Lacey, *Boroko*, pp. 298 - 299.

43. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom*, pp. 23 - 40.

44. See as an example of this CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Angus Wood, Chairman of the Ngongo Farmers' Association, Newcastle, 16 September 1930, pp. 1187 - 1188.

45. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Thompson Tembe, Newcastle, 16 September 1930, pp. 1212 - 1215. Tembe related a long litany of woes which included long working hours, lack of cash wages, delay in planting of tenant crops due to priority being given to those of the farmer and the victimisation of tenants and ex-tenants.

that the trickle of those fleeing certain white farms became a flood during the depression. Young male Africans, already discontented and disenchanted with working for *boroko*<sup>46</sup> deserted the farms for the urban areas.<sup>47</sup> This sometimes led to their parents being turned off the farmer's lands. The magistrate of Bulwer, Mr Franz, testified to the attitude of farmers in this regard:

‘Well, your sons have gone; I have no further use for you; you are too old; you cannot do the work’ and he turns them off...<sup>48</sup>

Others, motivated by sheer desperation, chose to stay and accept the deteriorating conditions:

Dr Lucas: Have they [the African tenants] complained about the way in which they are treated in individual cases by farmers, abuse of powers over tenants and so on?

Mr Hancock: They have got to that state now that if only they are allowed to live on the land, some of them will put up with anything.<sup>49</sup>

Against this backdrop it is not difficult to see why African political activity, and particularly militancy, among labour tenants in the rural areas diminished. The collapse of the direction and leadership given by the ICU campaign in the countryside, the vigorous anti-ICU propaganda launched by white agricultural interests aided and abetted by Solomon and Dube and, most of all, the rapidly deteriorating position of rural Africans, conspired to render such militancy inappropriate. Conditions were indeed desperate, and Africans found themselves being forced into meekly acquiescing or facing the threat of starvation. This is not to say that resentment did not remain; on the contrary, discontent festered beneath

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46. Literally, for "a place to sleep" or for nothing.

47. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Mr Hudson, Magistrate of Newcastle, Newcastle, 16 September 1930, pp. 1198 - 1199. Hudson described "frequent cases of desertion". Thompson Tembe, in reply to a question which suggested that tenants were forced to accept terms dictated by farmers said: "It may be that our forefathers and forebears submitted to that kind of life, but we, representing the younger generation, are now rebelling against it." CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Thompson Tembe, Newcastle, 16 September 1930, p. 1225.

48. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Heinrich Karl Franz, Bulwer, 10 October 1930, p. 2282.

49. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Charles Edward Hancock, Ixopo, 9 October 1930, pp. 2216 - 2217.

the surface, but instead of open militancy, many resorted to desertion as a way of registering their protest. In order to combat this trend, and to stem the tidal movement away from white farms, the Native Service Contract Act was passed in 1932.<sup>50</sup> This law, amongst other provisions, made it an offence for an urban employer to employ a contracted farm labourer beyond the time of absence stipulated by his rural employer.<sup>51</sup>

Conditions on the sugar estates were hardly any better. Work on the sugar estates had never been very popular with Natal Africans and large numbers of Africans from outside Natal, mainly from Mozambique, Basutoland and Transkei, were imported annually to work the estates. However, when conditions deteriorated in rural Natal and in the reserves, many more Africans endeavoured to find employment on the estates, especially when urban avenues of employment were simultaneously being closed to them.<sup>52</sup> This surplus of labour and the precarious position of the industry during the depression (already described above)<sup>53</sup> gave rise to significant cuts in wages and even to dismissals.<sup>54</sup> Africans could thus not find shelter from the depression on the sugar estates.

Conditions on other white farms throughout the province, while not as desperate as in northern Natal or the sugar estates, were also marked by deteriorating conditions of employment, wage cuts, evictions and retrenchments.<sup>55</sup> Again the evidence presented to the NEC shows quite clearly that wages were low and working conditions harsh. There is also considerable evidence to suggest that these conditions were exacerbated by the depression and the drought. The number of

50. Act no. 24 of 1932.

51. For a discussion of the perceived necessity for this act and of its draconian provisions, see Lacey, *Boroko*, pp. 164 - 180.

52. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Samuel Forest, Empangeni, 26 September 1930, p. 1830. "I think that what is influencing our local labour at the moment is the difficulty of the Natives getting labour in the towns, because there are not so many Natives employed in the towns today as there used to be — or it does not seem like it...I think there are far less Natives employed today through the stringency of trade than there were..."

53. See Chapter Five.

54. Minnaar, "Unemployment", p. 61.

55. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom*, pp. 21 - 62.

bankruptcies among Natal farmers, and their heavy indebtedness, inevitably affected the labour on these farms, which was largely African.<sup>56</sup> Despite a slight increase in the number of Africans employed on farms throughout the Union during the depression years, the proportion of the total African population employed on white farms remained fairly static, indicating that an insignificant number of Africans were able to find shelter from the depression in such employment.<sup>57</sup>

Those Africans unfortunate enough to be evicted from white farms, and those who chose to leave rather than accept less favourable conditions of tenancy or employment, found it difficult to secure land in the overcrowded reserves of either Natal or Zululand.<sup>58</sup> Most chiefs simply had no more land to allocate,<sup>59</sup> and normally hospitable relatives were unable to provide shelter and food for such landless Africans for any length of time. The reserves were increasingly unable to support the population they normally carried; declining food production, overgrazing and disease all undermined the reserve economy.<sup>60</sup> When this already stressed economy was put under further pressure by the worst drought in living memory, the results were almost catastrophic.<sup>61</sup> Thousands of head of cattle and other livestock died and the government was forced to supply maize to thousands of starving people; there was simply no alternative if mass starvation were to be prevented. Nor did the catalogue of disaster end there: locust invasions, outbreaks of cattle disease, malaria and profiteering storekeepers all conspired to make the early years of the 1930s the "years of red dust". Faced with this plethora of disasters, many Africans chose to leave the reserves for the towns, in direct opposition to the legislative and administrative measures then being employed to direct the flow of Africans in the other direction. The towns became for the Africans what they were for the white rural poor — havens of hope and places of refuge and escape from

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56. See above, Chapter Five.

57. See Union of South Africa, *Union Statistics for Fifty Years*, A-8 and G-3.

58. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of John Whittle Bennett, representing the Khambula Farmers' Association, Vryheid, 20 September 1930, p. 1542. Bennett said: "If a Native is no good to us we kick him off. Nobody wants him, and the result is that he goes to a mission station."

59. See as an example of this the statement of Chief Mgugu Mkize of the Camperdown district. CAD, NEC, K26, F4, Evidence of Chief Mkize, Pietermaritzburg, 10 April 1931, p. 6825.

60. See above, Chapter Six.

61. See above pp. 256ff.



slow starvation. If Africans were fortunate enough to secure residence and employment in the urban areas during the depression, they tended to stay there for extended periods, both to earn more money and to avoid going back to the ravaged rural areas.

Nor could rural Africans escape the ravages of the depression and drought through paid employment on the mines. It has already been shown that despite the fact that underground work had never enjoyed great popularity amongst the Zulu, there was such a flood of Africans presenting themselves for mine work that the depressed coal-mines of Natal, which were already retrenching workers, turned away scores of desperate potential workers. Most of these appear to have originated from the reserves.<sup>62</sup> Even the gold mines of the Witwatersrand, which were in a better economic position because of the rising gold price and were hiring extra workers after 1931, could not cope with the flood of potential African workers. Reference has already been made to a countrywide circular issued by the Secretary of Native Affairs in which he instructed departmental officials to discourage Africans from going to the Witwatersrand gold mines in search of work.<sup>63</sup> It is thus painfully obvious that the mines too, provided no opportunities for escape from the ravages of the depression and drought. In fact, the retrenchments which had taken place on the Natal coal-mines gave mine owners and officials the opportunity to rid themselves of "agitators" amongst the African workforce, another factor contributing to the end of militancy among Africans.<sup>64</sup>

Given all this evidence, it is hardly surprising that there was little political militancy among Africans in the rural areas of Natal during this time of deprivation. While it is certainly true that political activity did not cease, the heady days of mass organisation and protest by the ICU in the countryside were past. What little ICU activity still survived was both clandestine and rather ineffective.<sup>65</sup> After the decline of the ICU, most political activity in the rural areas of the province was once again focused around the person of Solomon kaDinuzulu and his unceasing struggle

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62. See Chapter Seven.

63. See Chapter Seven.

64. See Chapter Four.

65. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom*, pp. 253 - 254.

to be officially recognised as king. However, as Cope has shown, Solomon's political career was "terminated" in 1930 when he allowed his increasing frustration, at the continued refusal of the state to recognise his claim to the title of king, to surface in a drunken insult to the Governor-General.<sup>66</sup> Solomon, reprimanded and punished, retreated into "sickness".

The Zulu nationalist movement, *Inkatha kaZulu*, associated with Solomon and his claims, was also practically moribund by 1930.<sup>67</sup> Solomon's brief flirtation with Champion's ICU *yase* Natal in September 1930 should be seen as simply that — a political somersault which could only have been dictated by a re-evaluation of the parlous position of the royal finances.<sup>68</sup> It is well known that Solomon was a spendthrift and deeply in debt. What is less obvious is that much of the revenue which had flowed into the coffers of the ICU should have been payable (or so Solomon thought) to him as a form of "tribute".<sup>69</sup>

It should not be seen only as a result of Solomon's liberal spending that the Zulu royal house was in dire financial straits; Solomon's government stipend had been halved as a punishment for the slighting of the Governor-General and there seemed to be no possibility of him achieving the recognition he craved. One can extrapolate from his actions of September 1930 and those that followed, a desperate need for cash. The increasingly difficult conditions in the region had cut deeply into Solomon's revenue, and all existing sources of income had to be tapped, even those which had formerly been unpalatable.

It has been convincingly demonstrated by both Cope and La Hausse that far more effort and energy went into the collection of cash and cattle, to fund the ever-escalating debts of the Zulu royal house in the period 1931-1933, than was expended on political activism. Once the funds of *Inkatha* were exhausted (Solomon himself

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66. Cope, *To Bind the Nation*, pp. 240 - 250.

67. *Ibid.*, pp. 249 - 258.

68. Solomon was heavily in debt. Cope goes so far as to state that Solomon's purpose in "dropping in" on the ICU meeting chaired by Champion "...was evidently to stake a claim to the organisation's revenue". Cope, *To Bind the Nation*, p. 251.

69. *Ibid.*

was treasurer of the organisation and no doubt regarded the funds of the organisation as part of the privy purse) Solomon had to depend on a network of royal collectors for his income. The increasing levels of poverty, unemployment and the ravages of the drought meant that tribute could no longer be collected largely in cash. Instead, emaciated scrub cattle had to be accepted, transported and sold to provide Solomon with funds. The lack of control over these royal collectors meant that Solomon actually appears to have received only a small proportion of the money, the rest of which went to support the collectors during a time of crisis.

This diminution of his expected income further aggravated the financial embarrassment of the king<sup>70</sup> and may have restricted his campaign for official recognition. Solomon, as traditional leader of the Zulu, was expected by his followers to maintain a court commensurate with his status. It is clear that after 1930, Solomon was unable to do so, and his esteem in the eyes of both his subjects and officialdom, was suffering. It is possible that his increasing impoverishment might also have affected his self-esteem. By 1932 Solomon was, in La Hausse's words, "reduced to beggary" and was telling the Nongoma magistrate that he was "...as a dead man..."<sup>71</sup> Perhaps the parlous state of the royal finances may provide the key to the explanation of Solomon's rapid decline into alcoholism after 1930.

If the depression and the subsequent drought were to impinge so deeply on the fortunes of the head of the Zulu royal house, how much more deeply would the conditions have affected those who were relatively worse off, even discounting the fact that Solomon spent a great deal of money?<sup>72</sup>

This contention is borne out by La Hausse's twin study of Petros Lamula and Lymon Maling. Both men had strong rural links and both became embroiled in a daily

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70. *Ibid.*, pp. 262 - 271.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

72. This argument is somewhat speculative, for the whole issue of Solomon's income and expenditure during the last five years of his life is shrouded in mystery. Official statistical evidence does not begin to uncover the many sources of income Solomon enjoyed. Equally, it is extremely difficult to ascertain exactly what he spent. Furthermore, the officials dealing with the king were well aware of their lack of complete information. La Hausse puts the total amount collected by *Inkatha* at £20 000 and "thousands of head of cattle". See La Hausse, "Ethnicity", p. 303.

struggle for survival as a consequence of the rapid erosion of their economic bases. Maling was one of the "royal collectors" who appears to have made a precarious living out of these transactions. Far from being the dangerous agitator that officialdom labelled him, Maling had developed a mutual dependence with Solomon which had become increasingly desperate by 1930.<sup>73</sup> By 1931, La Hausse argued, behind his

ruthless pursuit of personal material advantage through cattle collecting lay Maling's attempt to reverse an historical trajectory of downward social mobility...<sup>74</sup>

His cattle collecting activities increased as Solomon's impoverishment increased. Maling was not the only example of those who had turned to cattle collecting ostensibly on behalf of Solomon, but who in reality were supporting themselves from the meagre profits; several whites and even royal *izinduna* were also involved in this.<sup>75</sup>

Similarly, the fortunes of Petros Lamula showed a now familiar decline. In 1927, he was entitled to draw an annual income of between £36 and £60 from church contributions, but by 1932 his income had been fixed at £36, and with a whole host of expenses, Lamula's financial position was becoming desperate and he had to market a revised edition of his book *UZulukaMalandela* to make ends meet.<sup>76</sup> He was constantly on the move throughout the country, marketing his books and prints of the Zulu royal lineage, in a desperate struggle to remain solvent. Far from being the religious and political firebrand of former years, Lamula was reduced to fighting not only for his own livelihood, but to retain his position of leadership in the church he had founded. His experiences during the depression mirrored, in many ways, the experiences of the Christianised African elite of the province.

The Natal *kholwa* elite, which had joined in an alliance with the more traditional

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73. *Ibid.*, p. 314.

74. *Ibid.*, pp. 324 - 325.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 332.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

Zulu leadership to form and sustain *Inkatha* in its earlier years (mainly due to their quest for land)<sup>77</sup> withdrew from that organisation, (possibly because of Solomon's spendthrift ways) and threw in their lot with Pixley Seme and the African National Congress (ANC).<sup>78</sup> However, despite having important links in the rural areas of the province,<sup>79</sup> Seme does not appear to have engaged in significant political activity in the rural areas once Solomon and *Inkatha* had faded from the political scene. In fact, as has been demonstrated, under pressure from the onslaughts of depression and drought and in the face of state repression, the political climate in the whole of rural Natal changed from one of radicalism to one of acquiescence after 1930.<sup>80</sup> This change even affected Seme. La Hausse quotes Seme as saying that Africans should "...work loyally with the Europeans".<sup>81</sup> These are not the politics of confrontation but of co-operation; a co-operation aimed at manipulating a segregationist system to best advantage. Walshe argued that this was part of a countrywide policy which would become a feature of the later depression years.<sup>82</sup>

In the urban areas of Natal, all eyes were focused on Durban where, in June 1929, the frustrations of the urban working class had found expression in the violence of the Beer Hall riots and in the subsequent boycott of beer halls.<sup>83</sup> These boycotts spread throughout Natal and continued for most of the depression years and have been seen as a "politicizing experience for African workers".<sup>84</sup> They were essentially a hangover from the riots but can also be seen as a reaction on the part of African women to increasing urban impoverishment.<sup>85</sup>

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77. Cope, *To Bind the Nation*, pp. 97 - 98.

78. *Ibid.*, pp. 254 - 257. Cope allèges that it was the Natal *Kholwa* vote which saw Seme elected President of the ANC. See p. 215.

79. Seme was married to Solomon's sister, Princess Harriet kaDinuzulu.

80. This is mirrored in the career of Petros Lamula. See La Hausse, "Ethnicity", pp. 196 - 200.

81. *Ibid.*, pp. 195 - 196.

82. Walshe, *African Nationalism*, pp. 229 - 231.

83. See La Hausse, "Struggle", pp. 171 - 183 and Nuttall, "Class", pp. 50 - 61.

84. La Hausse, "Dispersal", p. 83.

85. The brewing of *utshwala* was an important economic activity for women, both urban and rural. Many made a precarious living out of the brewing of beer for sale in the urban areas in defiance of the law. Conversely, there was also an element of temperance in the opposition of women to the sale of municipal beer. Women resented their men spending even part of their meagre wages on beer at a time when money was in short supply and there were children to

It is important to note that the riots took place before the Wall Street crash and before the full effects of the world economic slump were felt in the port town. This is not to suggest that the period was one of general prosperity, especially in the experiences of the African and Indian working classes, for it was not. It has already been shown that industrial wages, for example, were amongst the lowest in the Union<sup>86</sup> and that living conditions in the town were appalling.<sup>87</sup> A large surplus of labour,<sup>88</sup> which resided in the town or inhabited the fringes of the town, kept wage levels low, much to the benefit of local employers. Conditions in other urban areas of the province were similar; wages were low and once the depression struck, the ranks of the unemployed grew by the day.

When the effects of the depression did begin to manifest themselves in the province, it was not long before enterprises of all kinds began to reduce staff. Job losses for the depression period are almost impossible to quantify accurately across the province, but the little information that may be regarded as accurate shows that of all the population groups, Africans were the most likely to lose their employment during the depression. Retrenchment and consequent unemployment affected almost every sector of trade, commerce and industry. Not only did the threat of retrenchment hang over practically every employee in every enterprise, but always present was the sure knowledge that should current employment be lost, a considerable struggle would be experienced in obtaining other employment in the formal sector of the economy. The economy was not the only area dictating the retrenchment of black workers; government policy, as has been illustrated above,<sup>89</sup> was also encouraging the replacement of black workers by "civilised" labour.

This policy, bolstered by white public opinion, had a considerable effect on the

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be fed and clothed. It was for this reason that women played such a significant role in the beer boycott, especially in rural towns in the province. See Bradord, *A Taste of Freedom*, pp. 247 - 250.

86. Van der Horst, *Native Labour*, p. 263.

87. Hemson, "Dockworkers", p. 265.

88. Mayor's Minute, 1932, p. 6. This surplus was estimated at 70 000 prior to the depression.

89. See Chapter Three.

racial composition of the workforce throughout the province.<sup>90</sup> Whether applied to state departments at all levels,<sup>91</sup> or to parastatals like the South African Railways and Harbours,<sup>92</sup> or to ordinary business enterprises and industry, workers of colour (particularly Africans) found themselves under increasing threat of replacement by whites. Despite protests and a series of scathing articles in *Ilanga lase Natal*,<sup>93</sup> the process of providing employment for whites at the expense of workers of colour continued throughout the depression years, greatly exacerbating the unemployment of Africans. As a consequence, those workers who, despite all these threats to their employment, managed to keep their jobs, were unlikely to exhibit any form of behaviour other than docility, even in the face of deteriorating conditions. In fact, Smith has shown that jobs begun in the depression years had a higher average duration than the norm, indicating that Africans were staying in employment *with the same employer* in the urban areas for longer periods than had been usual prior to the depression.<sup>94</sup> This can only be seen as an indication that conditions necessitated the adoption of this strategy.<sup>95</sup>

Wage levels were forced down during the depression as employers trimmed their expenditure,<sup>96</sup> and conditions of employment became distinctly less advantageous. Smith detected a large increase in the number of Africans who fell into the lowest-paid category of workers between the years 1930 and 1934 — these workers receiving less than 9s 6d per week.<sup>97</sup> In some instances, working hours were lengthened; in other cases short time was introduced.<sup>98</sup> Generally, working conditions for workers became more difficult and exploitative. The cost of living

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90. See Chapter Three above.

91. Including, strangely enough given the political climate, the plan by Pirow to retrench African policemen. See *Ilanga lase Natal*, 31 July 1931.

92. For the extent of the application of this policy to the SAR and H, see Salmon, "Afrikaner Nationalism", pp. 234 - 235.

93. See *Ilanga lase Natal*, 15 August 1930; 7 November 1930; 6 March 1931; 12 June 1931; 12 February 1932; 11 November 1932; 11 August 1933.

94. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 413.

95. Hemson, "Dockworkers", p. 265.

96. *Ibid.*

97. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 412.

98. See Edley, "Population", pp. 132 - 133.

did decline a little but not to levels which could offset the decline in real wage levels.<sup>99</sup> Yet despite this, there were only two notable incidences of strike action by workers in Durban — the ricksha pullers' strike of 1930<sup>100</sup> and the strike by dockworkers in 1932<sup>101</sup> — both of which ended in ignominious defeat for the strikers.

In the former case, the ricksha pullers wanted the hiring companies which supplied their rickshas to reduce their weekly fee from 10s to 5s, as a result of the fall off in custom due to the depression. Such a step had been taken in Pietermaritzburg, which no doubt stiffened the pullers' resolve to have the same measures implemented in Durban. In Durban the ricksha pullers were also facing increasing competition from faster and cheaper transport in the form of municipal trams, and were also bound up in a number of "red tape" measures which prevented them from returning to their stands unless they had a fare who wished to go there. Some were forced into giving free rides in order to return to parts of the town where they were able to get fares, an imposition which was deeply resented.<sup>102</sup> The owners refused the demands and a strike was initiated on 19 May 1930.<sup>103</sup> Some of the estimated 1 300 pullers made their way to Pietermaritzburg where they found employment, while others simply decided to return to the reserves, saying that they would simply give up work rather than continue at their present rate of pay.<sup>104</sup> It appears that the ricksha pullers had genuine grievances and were indeed suffering as a result of the depression. The local state concurred that they were in some difficulty:

..the claim by the ricksha pullers that they were hardly making a living at the present time, should be taken seriously.<sup>105</sup>

The strike was shortlived, and most pullers had returned to work under the same

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99. *Ibid.*, pp. 30 - 31.

100. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

101. Hemson, "Dockworkers", pp. 273 - 275.

102. Edley, "Population", p. 126.

103. *Natal Mercury*, 20 May 1930.

104. *Natal Mercury*, 17 May 1930.

105. NA, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Native Advisory Board (NAB), 21 May 1930.



conditions by the end of May 1930, as they could not sustain a lengthy period without any form of income.<sup>106</sup> Significantly, there was very little violence and "no widespread militancy", according to Posel.<sup>107</sup>

The same factors operated against the dock workers in their clash with the harbour authorities. The dock workers were largely *togt* workers who were hired on a daily basis to load and unload cargo and perform other tasks requiring manual labour on the waterfront. The decline in the number of vessels calling at the port of Durban (a direct result of the world depression and the consequent fall off in coast-wise and international trade) meant that fewer workers were required and so competition for jobs took on serious proportions, as the following illustrates:

Midnight sees a strange sight at the Point, at the dock gates near the Port Manager's department, since the shipping depression has set in. The watcher will see a Native labourer from one of the huge compounds in the area arrive on the scene and gravely place on the kerb, say, a hat, weighted with stones so that it cannot be blown away. After a look round the Native will make his way back the way he came. Then, a few minutes later, another native will arrive and, in line with the hat put down a handkerchief...By one o'clock there is a straight line of all sorts of articles stretching over 100 yards down the road. For about nine hours, these goods are totally deserted. Then about six o'clock in the morning hundreds of Native labourers arrive on the scene. The owners of the various articles then pick them up, and occupy the positions of their bricks, or hats, or bottles. The explanation of this unusual performance is the shipping depression. Since things have been so quiet in the harbour, not so many labourers have been required and the man who wants a job must be on the spot early...<sup>108</sup>

The parlous state of the dock workers was further exacerbated by decisions to reduce wages, to cut food allowances, and to replace paid overtime with a compulsory sixty-hour working week.<sup>109</sup> The workers were not prepared to accept these measures and so came out on strike on 2 April 1932.<sup>110</sup> The strike was broken

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106. *Natal Mercury*, 30 May 1930.

107. R Posel, "The Durban Ricksha Pullers' 'Strikes' of 1918 and 1930", *Journal of Natal and Zulu History*, Vol. 8, 1985, p. 92.

108. *Natal Mercury*, 19 February 1931.

109. Hemson, "Dockworkers", p. 273.

through the use of white "scab" labour and non-striking African workers, all of whom were paid considerably more than the strikers had been receiving. The thousand strikers were paid off on the 7 April 1932.<sup>111</sup> Despite the exploitative nature of the changed working conditions, and the deleterious effect these would have on the workers, *Ilanga lase Natal* was critical of the strikers' actions. Dube wrote that their actions had merely added to the already high rate of African unemployment in Durban.<sup>112</sup> The *Natal Mercury* noted with satisfaction that when strikers were paid off, "...scores of other Natives who were willing to take their places were signed on".<sup>113</sup> The fact that there were "scores of other Natives" who were willing to replace strikers certainly restricted options for workers wishing to express their discontent and may have contributed significantly to the changing political climate in the province after 1930.<sup>114</sup>

Nor could unemployed or destitute Africans depend on any significant assistance from local authorities. Even those reduced to penury and the indignity of begging on the streets found little sympathy:

Native beggars find scant welcome in Durban. They are sent back to their kraals as soon as the opportunity offers. Complaints have been made ... of the presence in the town of crippled Native beggars, some revoltingly deformed. 'They get very little encouragement indeed in Durban', said Mr C J Layman of the Corporation's Native Administration Department...'They come down from the kraals because they

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110. *Ibid.*, p. 274.

111. *Natal Mercury*, 8 April 1932.

112. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 8 April 1932. The radicalised dockworkers were never a part of Dube's more conservative political constituency and he obviously used the affair both to score political points and perhaps to pander to his capitalist backers. He was constantly warning workers against involvement of "communists" in their organisations.

113. *Natal Mercury*, 8 April 1932. From these accounts it appears the actions of the Railways and Harbours officials were definitely based on the principle that the strikers had to be fired "*pour encourager les autres*."

114. The strike by dockworkers was very much the exception to the rule after 1930 and may partly be ascribed to the high level of militancy amongst the most exploited of all Durban's workers and to the considerable efforts of the Communist Party to organise the workers. The serious consequences of the proposed alteration of their working conditions may also have played an important role. Hemson's comments on this aspect are insightful. See Hemson, "Dockworkers", pp. 273 - 275.

realise that in town their chance of picking up a living as beggars is far rosier'.<sup>115</sup>

Nor was the presence of large numbers of unemployed Indians any more welcome. A high level of anti-Asiatic sentiment was present throughout the period and was even present in government policy, as Minnaar points out:

In the urban areas of Natal, especially in Durban, the Indians were the first and principal victims of unemployment during the Great Depression. For the Indian community largely dependent on wage earning with no other resources (having no 'reserves' to return to) there were two factors which intensified their misery. The first was the government policy of solving part of the white unemployment problem by giving to whites the jobs traditionally held by non-whites. This ensured that the burden of unemployment fell mainly on the poorest sections, the non-whites. In this manner, many Indians were dismissed from the railways and the number of Indians employed by municipalities in Natal was restricted. Secondly, during the time of the Great Depression, no provision whatsoever was made by the government for unemployed Indians...Indian unemployment, which was very considerable, was borne mostly by the tradition of the wider or extended family system — an Indian would open his doors even to remote cousins in distress.<sup>116</sup>

Indians, it must be admitted, did receive some limited assistance from local authorities, but this only occurred after considerable lobbying.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, the measures implemented have to be regarded as inadequate in the light of the magnitude of the problem prevalent in that community.

No relief works were ever begun for Africans in the urban areas of Natal; local authorities simply did the bare minimum to assist destitute Africans through soup kitchens or other schemes.<sup>118</sup> Local authorities, in line with central government policy, preferred to use various stratagems to force Africans to leave the urban areas

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115. *Natal Mercury*, 24 September 1930.

116. Minnaar, "Unemployment", p. 63.

117. See Chapter Eight. Minnaar does actually acknowledge this, but states that "...only towards the end of the Great Depression did both Durban and Pietermaritzburg begin offering relief work for unemployed Indians..." Minnaar, "Unemployment", p. 63.

118. See Chapter Eight.

and so reduce the surplus of labour and consequent unemployment. A direct link was established in the "official mind" between various urban problems such as strikes, crime and other manifestations of worker militancy and the "surplus" of Africans in the urban areas of the province. Africans were thus caught in a vice — they were forced by circumstances to leave the rural areas, and were made to feel distinctly unwelcome in the urban areas. The Chief Constable in Durban, the focal point of militancy, was given repeated instructions to clear the town of surplus Africans.<sup>119</sup> Comforting claims were published to the effect that the "large floating population" of between 60 000 and 70 000 Africans in Durban during the later 1920s had been reduced to some 20 000 during the depression years.<sup>120</sup> No one who was acquainted with the workings of the municipal NAD would have placed much credence in this; all evidence actually points to the growth of the "surplus population" in the town during the depression years.

The weight of evidence suggests that the economic climate in the urban areas of Natal was such that Africans experienced severe hardship during the depression years. As they constituted the lowest ranks of the employment hierarchy and as most of them functioned as unskilled labour, they were very vulnerable to dismissal.<sup>121</sup> Particularly vulnerable were the migrant workers who had no other urban support base. In this climate, the presence in the major urban centres of a floating population of surplus Africans did indeed put a significant damper on political militancy amongst ordinary workers.

A similar case can be made with regard to the African elite — the bourgeois and aspirant bourgeois leaders of the urban African population. If ordinary Africans were severely affected by the depression, then the same factors must have had a considerable impact on the lives of the elite. They were too inextricably bound up in the complex set of relationships, socio-economic and political, which governed the lives of Africans in the urban areas of Natal, not to have been affected. The African businessmen, no matter what economic niche they filled in society, were largely

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119. NAD, 3/DBN, Minutes of the Native Administration Committee (NAD), 15 May 1930; 19 January 1931. Hemson claims that 1 000 Africans were expelled from the town during 1930. Hemson, "Dockworkers", p. 267.

120. Mayor's Minute, 1932, p. 6.

121. Nuttall, "Class", pp. 143 - 144.

dependent on their fellow Africans for their economic well-being. Even those who were not businessmen in the strict sense such as the clergy of the myriad independent (and, for that matter, non-independent) churches, or members of the teaching profession, were still to some extent dependent on their fellow Africans for part of their financial support.

Nuttall has stated that "the depression hit some of Durban's African traders hard" and this is certainly true. Some were forced to close their businesses, while others fought a rearguard action aimed at preserving their positions in the face of official disapprobation and the depression. African traders operated on the fringes of the economic world; they lacked sources of capital and networks of distribution and supply, and were constantly harassed as state policymakers had no wish to encourage a permanent class of urban African traders.<sup>122</sup> It is indeed significant that in the economic climate of the depression years, so much energy should have been devoted to establishing and improving the rights of urban traders, particularly in Durban. The way to the achievement of these improved conditions was seen to lie not through confrontation, but rather through co-operation with the local state by making use of newly established structures. The formation of the Durban Bantu Traders' Association, and the significant number of traders represented on the NAB bear testimony to the accommodationist approach adopted by those members of the elite struggling to survive the harsh economic conditions. The evidence tends to bear this contention out. Municipal files of this time are filled with correspondence, much of it obsequious, requesting the improvement of conditions for traders.<sup>123</sup>

Having given up their identification with the labouring masses to become part of the local state's machinery, the trader members of the NAB expected some sort of *quid pro quo*, but this was slow in coming. In fact, as La Hausse pointed out, the Native Revenue Fund (the chief account through which the town council funded African administration) was so reduced by the boycott of the beer halls, that the council was considering raising the rents of all its African lessees, including those on the NAB. The issue of a "Native Village" to house the African elite was also employed to bring

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122. Nuttall, "Class", pp. 119 - 120.

123. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

pressure to bear on the traders and other petty bourgeois on the NAB to end the boycott.<sup>124</sup> Once this became apparent, the NAB obliged by calling for the suspension of the boycott.<sup>125</sup> The council did not approve any liquor licences for Africans, a matter of some concern to the wealthier traders, who had seen the lucrative possibilities of this trade and who had sought to capitalise on the crisis of the boycotts.<sup>126</sup> La Hausse sums up the activities of the traders on the NAB in his characterisation of the NAB's activities:

A predominant concern of the NAB members had been, and continued to be, the attempt to secure better conditions for a broad spectrum of traders in Durban.<sup>127</sup>

The very fact that the traders and their backers entered into a co-operative type of relationship with the local state must surely be an indication of their concern to better their economic conditions; something which could not be achieved through open confrontation, but only through accommodationist politics.

The same conclusion appears to have been reached by the ANC's Natal-based leader, Pixley Seme. It must be pointed out that on a national level, the ANC was bankrupt as even funds, promised by various leaders in the constitution of the organisation, had not been paid. When Seme took over the reins of leadership in 1930, he inherited a considerable load of debt. Walshe suggested that Seme was trying to revive the Upper House of the ANC (which consisted largely of traditional leaders) and wanted to place all financial control in their hands in return for greater financial support for the organisation. This would have made for more conservative, rural-based politics. It is clear that even prior to the onset of the depression and drought, the ANC was in dire financial straits.<sup>128</sup> This state of affairs could only be severely aggravated by the depression, as the meagre resources which sustained the movement all but dried up. This had important consequences, for the lack of finance and the organisational disarray of the movement, which was

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124. La Hausse, "Dispersal", p. 93.

125. Nuttall, "Class", p. 214.

126. La Hausse, "Struggle", p. 238.

127. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

128. Walshe, *African Nationalism*, pp. 214 - 215.

split in most of the provinces, all contributed to the lack of meaningful activity at a time when increasing pressure was being applied to Africans. Walshe quoted Sol Plaatje as saying that 1931 was a "barren year" and Selope Thema as saying there had never been such "...inactivity and apathy on the part of our leaders".<sup>129</sup> Seme was actually struck off the roll of attorneys in 1932 for what appears to have been the misappropriation of funds from African clients. He alleged that he had used the retainer he had been given to fight an eviction case on behalf of the Africans on the farm Waverley, near Pretoria, to "fight the case politically" and to defray expenses he had incurred in the process of using "...influence to reach the authorities politically". His defence was rejected by the Supreme Court.<sup>130</sup> It may be suggested that the retainer was used to fund his political activities. Couzens has been extremely critical of Seme's role during the 1930s, as the following opinions indicate:

Sadly, too, the man who launched the ANC ship in 1912, nearly sank it when he was its president in the 1930s. A combination of lethargy and corruption nearly destroyed the organisation then.<sup>131</sup>

Seme's leadership was conservative, lack-lustre and autocratic. He had grand designs of making the African National Congress an engine of economic self-help. He tried to revive the now defunct House of Chiefs with which the Congress had been burdened at its inception.<sup>132</sup>

Cobley had a similar view of Seme, expressed in the following terms:

Seme wished to move away from the realm of the 'common agitator who only wants to create strife and class hatred'. He wanted his Congress to foster 'Race Pride' by promoting economic self-sufficiency...He expressly avoided (and abhorred) the obvious opportunities for mass mobilisation and radical action. Instead Congress would be dedicated to the foundation of a virtual 'parallel' black capitalist society. It was a strategy conceived within and for a tiny black petty

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129. *Ibid.*, p. 254.

130. R Rive and T Couzens, *Seme: The Founder of the ANC*, UWC History Series No. 2, Skotaville, Johannesburg, 1991, p. 5.

131. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

132. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

bourgeoisie, with more or less conscious echoes of the pleas of African traders for protected trading spheres. There was little of benefit to black wage labourers in such a strategy and, consequently, no politicised wage earner was likely to support it. This political reality, set against Seme's grand schemes for 'national development', underlay the political failure of Congress throughout the 1930s.<sup>133</sup>

Part of the explanation of the dissipation of militancy at a national level is to be found in the above evidence.

On the level of provincial politics a similar pattern emerged, for the same set of circumstances may be seen to have applied to that doyen of African political activity in Natal, John Dube. Evidence has already been presented of Dube's "alliance with capital", but perhaps the significance of this needs to be highlighted. Dube had lent his support to the campaign, by sugar farmers, coal-mine owners and other white capitalists, against the militants, especially the ICU and the Communist Party, even prior to the depression. While it is possible to suggest that Dube sought to clear the political scene of rivals and to ingratiate himself with the state by so doing, it is equally possible that Dube saw future financial possibilities in the relationship he was developing with capital. What little evidence there is appears to bear this out. The Ohlange Institute had been developed with the backing of white capitalists, including Marshall Campbell.<sup>134</sup> Even some British aristocrats had been collecting funds for the Institute in the 1920s.<sup>135</sup> Reference has already been made to the fact that Dube had received cash from capitalists for his Native Affairs Organisation Fund prior to the depression, part of which he had used to purchase a new printing press and a "cheap motor car" in which he could visit chiefs in the rural areas. Upwards of £1 000 had been subscribed to this fund even prior to the depression.<sup>136</sup> Such a sum of money was not insignificant, even to a man such as Dube, who had many irons in the fire at the time.<sup>137</sup>

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133. Cobley, *Class and Consciousness*, pp. 162 - 163.

134. R Hunt Davis, "John L Dube: A South African Exponent of Booker T Washington", *Journal of African Studies*, Vol 2. No. 4, Winter 1975/76, p. 524.

135. See M Marable, "African Nationalist: The Life of John Langalibalele Dube", Ph.D. thesis, University of Maryland, 1976, pp. 290 - 320.

136. See Chapter Four.

137. Not only was he owner of the newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal* and owner of the Ohlange Institute, a technical school for Africans, but he was also involved in other ventures.



During the depression, it may be suggested, Dube suffered like all other entrepreneurs, black or white, from the fall off of trade and the general shortage of ready cash. Although *Ilanga lase Natal* was relatively cheap and was published only once a week, the costs involved must have been considerable. Whether those costs were recouped through sales is unknown, but it is significant that the newspaper carried column after column of advertising during the depression years.<sup>138</sup> Likewise, it is not known whether the Ohlange Institute was a paying concern during the depression years. British funding had been terminated in early 1929 and the Institute was desperately short of funds even prior to the depression.<sup>139</sup> There is clear evidence to suggest that Dube was soliciting funds from local capital for both these ventures during the depression years.<sup>140</sup> He was also using his newspaper to carry advertisements for his book *Insila kaShaka*<sup>141</sup> which he had written in 1930, and for a pamphlet *Ukuziphakata kahle*,<sup>142</sup> which he had written during 1933. These endeavours may have been designed to raise money. Although the evidence is fairly sparse, it may be speculated that all was not well in Dube's financial empire during the depression, and that to preserve his position, both financial and political, it was necessary for him to turn for assistance to the allies he had made earlier.<sup>143</sup> That being the case, it is then equally possible to suggest that in order to preserve and maintain the alliances he had established, his actions and public statements would of necessity have been tailored to suit those who were backing him financially.<sup>144</sup>

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138. An examination of the newspaper during the depression years will show that such advertising came not only from African enterprises but white ones too. It may be suggested that in order to retain such advertising, Dube would have had to tread the "correct" political line.

139. Marable, "African Nationalist", pp. 319 - 320.

140. See Chapter Four.

141. A S Gérard, *Four African Literatures*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971, p. 204.

142. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

143. This aspect requires a great deal more research before anything definitive in this connection can be posited.

144. Walshe cites an interview with a later editor of *Ilanga lase Natal*, R Dhlomo, and a speech made by Champion as evidence that even fellow Africans were aware of the possible links between Dube and capital. Walshe goes even further by suggesting that Dube's siding with the moderates in 1930 which saw the election of Seme, was as a result of Dube's links with capital, and that "...his moderation was partially conditioned by their financial aid to his Ohlange Institute". Walshe, *African Nationalism*, p. 230.

It may seem contradictory that earlier some of Dube's statements have been described as "inflammatory" and "strident",<sup>145</sup> but Dube was on fairly safe ground in calling for an end to the "civilised labour" policy. Although there was general white public support for it, many of the larger capitalists of Natal were privately not in favour. They saw the policy as costly in terms of the increased tax burden, the threat of "Afrikanerisation", and the restraints that the policy imposed on the employment of cheap black labour during the depression. Many also were of the opinion that the government could be doing more to assist their enterprises (by leaving the gold standard, paying out subsidies, etc.) and spending less energy on promoting a policy which was actually inimical to the interests of capital during a time of crisis. Similarly, urban capitalists were beginning to see the advantages of a more permanently settled urban African workforce, counterbalanced by a healthy reserve supply of labour in the towns. Thus, any criticism of strategies likely to interfere with the current labour dispensation would also have been greeted with guarded approval. Overall, it may be suggested that the value to his capitalist supporters of Dube's anti-ICU and anti-communist propaganda far outweighed any nagging doubts they might have harboured about his intentions.

Statements such as the following did help to allay suspicion of his motives:

The ICU are exploiting poor Native workers...The leaders are irresponsible, they do not understand the relation of capital to labour, the need for investment...What workers are they looking for in the native areas and reserves? Are any of the leaders engaged in business employing a number of people for farming and paying 8 shillings a day for their workers? How about that for men of Groutville, Amamzimtoti and Ifafa! Are they prepared to pay their employee that wage? How long can they raise cane at a profit if they pay such wages?<sup>146</sup>

There is, at this stage, not enough direct evidence to claim that Dube was a capitalist lackey, but enough evidence does exist to suggest that Dube's actions and statements

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145. According to Walshe, Dube was actually charged with inciting public violence in 1933, but was acquitted. See Walshe, *African Nationalism*, p. 222.

146. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 12 August 1927, quoted in Marks, *Ambiguities*, p. 72.

might to some extent have pandered to the interests of capital in promoting co-operation and not confrontation. Champion, in an obscure comment, not on Dube himself, none the less shows some insight into what may have motivated him:

There are two kinds of leadership. There is immature leadership and there is mature leadership. Immature leadership is when the man you have chosen to be a leader is not independent. If ever he works, he works with those who are not going to agree with the way wanted by the [mature] leaders. Now you are in the dilemma of serving two masters. Or, if you are a man with a business, you live by the good will of those who could close it at any time if you slip out of line by your words or actions.<sup>147</sup>

This is not to suggest that Dube fitted exactly into the situation described by Champion, and it would be facile to suggest that Dube's political stance in the late 1920s and early 1930s was motivated only by political self-interest. Neither can all the vituperation he poured upon the radicals, and his co-option of Solomon to join the struggle against the ICU, be simply ascribed to the preservation and maintenance of his political position as the conservative elder statesman.

Marks has suggested that even the leader of the ICU *yase* Natal, Champion, was in financial difficulties during the depression years. In Champion's case, the influence of the depression is difficult to assess, as the decline of the movement seriously affected the membership subscriptions upon which Champion depended. However, it is worth mentioning that Champion's flirtation with the chiefs, and with Solomon in particular, was motivated as much by the need for cash as by a desire to broaden the political base of his decaying movement. In a report to the leadership of the ICU, Champion wrote: "The greatest question is to get these people to contribute to our funds."<sup>148</sup> Swanson stated that Champion's African Co-operative Society, a clothing manufacturing company, went bankrupt in the wake of the Beer Hall riots when its white clientele boycotted the sales outlet. Champion himself related how, despite having been moved to cheaper rented premises, this business failed. The same fate met another enterprise started by Champion after his return from exile.<sup>149</sup> Whether either of these two failures was occasioned to any great extent by

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147. Swanson, *Mahlathi*, p. 111.

148. Marks, *Ambiguities*, p. 108.

149. Swanson, *Mahlathi*, pp. 164 - 165. See also Cobley, *Class and Consciousness*, p. 160.

the depression is difficult to ascertain. Champion voiced the dilemma that faced African entrepreneurs who became involved in politics:

Business affairs must not be mixed with politics. There are many well-to-do Europeans who even withdraw from parliament on the grounds that their business will not prosper if they remain in parliament. How difficult it is for a person like me who fights the laws that control Africans while paying respect to the Municipality on account of my stores. Anyone who knew in what a dilemma I am in would feel sorry for me.<sup>150</sup>

Throughout all his activism, Champion remained an entrepreneur. It was at his urging that Clermont "township" was developed as an African freehold settlement.<sup>151</sup> He was critical of the communists, saying in 1930:

I speak...as what is known as a labour leader when I say that the communists are opposed to (Native) interests and that the capitalist class must be created among all non-European races in South Africa. Without such a class there would be no hope of liberation for history revealed that the capitalist is and always will be the backbone of every country.<sup>152</sup>

Such evidence suggests another dimension to the man, his policies and the times he lived in, especially when it is recalled that he voted against Seme and for the communist Gumede, in the ANC presidential elections of 1930.<sup>153</sup>

Similarly, the state of the Communist Party in the province also deserves closer scrutiny. It is not necessary here to delve into either the "Africanisation" of the party on the instructions of Moscow, or the effects of this on the machinery of the party, for both have been incisively examined elsewhere.<sup>154</sup> What does require restating is that the President-General of the organisation elected in 1927, was a Natalian, Josiah Gumede. Gumede was simultaneously also the President of the ANC, until

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150. Swanson, *Mahlathi*, p. 166.

151. Cobley, *Class and Consciousness*, p. 160.

152. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

153. Walshe, *African Nationalism*, p. 181.

154. *Ibid.*, pp. 177 - 184.

his ousting by Seme in 1930. His ejection from the Congress, largely because of his more "radical" stance, brought about great division within the ANC and even within his own party. It was only in Durban that the communist-inspired pass-burning campaign of 16 December 1930 really amounted to anything. Thereafter, Walshe asserted, the party played only a "peripheral role" during the rest of the 1930s,<sup>155</sup> the depression being a crucial factor in the decline of the movement.<sup>156</sup> This assertion is borne out by Nuttall, who wrote:

The Depression...stifled militancy. Harsh economic realities reinforced the political effects of the suppression of communists after the 1930 Dinga's Day demonstration...There was little collective resistance in Durban against deepening misery. The capacity to resist was undermined by the economic and political vulnerability of unskilled workers. In the saturated labour market of the Depression, migrancy was weakened as a strategy of countering capitalist work routines. Increasing numbers of African workers were now totally reliant on urban jobs, so withdrawal from wage labour declined as an option.<sup>157</sup>

The depression and its effects on African labour must indeed be seen as the key reasons why the Communist Party failed to keep the flames of militancy burning in the town. Even the fortuitous creation of an instant martyr in the death of Nkosi, had insufficient impact to sustain the movement's militant activities beyond 1931. This is not to suggest that the Communist Party ceased to operate, for as has been shown elsewhere, the arrival of Eddie Roux in the town did provide some impetus. This was insignificant, however; the depression and state repression had effectively tamed the party in Natal.<sup>158</sup>

Having examined the fortunes of some of the leaders and the movements they headed, it remains to analyse the position of ordinary Africans in the urban areas of the province. It is immediately obvious that ordinary Africans were affected even more seriously by the depression. Dube wrote in *Ilanga lase Natal*:

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155. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

156. *Ibid.*, p. 171.

157. Nuttall, "Class", pp. 143, 145.

158. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

Some consideration at least should be given to the distress among Natives, the poorest section of the population of South Africa. If there should come upon the country any economic depression it must always play havoc upon the Natives in a severer manner than among the more affluent classes for the reason that they are the lowest paid in the Union and on top of that they are expected to provide for themselves and their families out of that meagre remuneration for their services. They no longer depend upon their Native food, which formerly was mainly the products of the soil and the chase as well as from their herds and flocks. They now live almost everywhere upon food for which they pay in money and labour...<sup>159</sup>

It may be suggested that faced with the depression and drought, declining opportunities for employment, and a high level of unemployment, Africans seeking a haven in the urban areas would not only have been prepared to accept a deterioration in working conditions, but would have actually sought to obtain employment at a level which in normal times they would have shunned. This is certainly borne out in the work of Smith. Smith found that during the depression jobs commenced by Africans had a longer than average duration;<sup>160</sup> that there was a marked increase in the number of Africans seeking urban employment for the first time; that the proportion of Africans over the age of 45 years seeking employment also increased;<sup>161</sup> and perhaps most importantly of all, that the proportion of Africans entering domestic service in the urban areas during the depression years showed a marked increase.<sup>162</sup>

In analysing these findings, the following emerges: the rural crisis was such that many who had not yet worked in the urban areas were being forced by circumstances to do so. The increase in persons over 45 years of age would indicate that even heads of households (*imizi*) were being forced by the conditions to seek work — something normally left to younger members. It may be suggested that domestic service assumed greater importance not only because other avenues were closed or closing, but because most domestic servants not only received wages but

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159. *Ilanga lase Natal*, 16 June 1933.

160. Smith, "Labour Resources", p. 413.

161. *Ibid.*, p. 381.

162. *Ibid.*, p. 350.

clothing, food and a place to stay as part of their conditions of employment. Such arrangements must have appeared very attractive in the economic climate of the times.

However, there is an added dimension to this change in the patterns of urban employment. The older workers were likely to be more conservative and family-orientated, more conscious of the responsibilities that weighed on them to earn money to support their families. Furthermore, great pressure would have been exerted by their employers on domestic workers to refrain from political activity, especially in a militant form. The large body of unemployed desperately seeking such relatively advantageous employment would also have restricted the latitude employers might otherwise have granted their servants — there were always scores eagerly waiting to fill the positions vacated by dismissed servants. All these factors, it may be posited, contributed to the decline and dissipation of the climate of militancy in the urban areas of the province after 1930.

Political activity among the Indian population of Natal was similarly affected by the depression. Apart from a few meetings at which the "civilised labour" policy and the high rate of unemployment among Indians were discussed, little political activism or militancy was exhibited. A number of reasons may be suggested for this. Firstly, the attention of the Indian community of Natal was only partially directed to affairs in their own region.<sup>163</sup> The early 1930s were years of increasing struggle for Home Rule in India itself, as Mahatma Gandhi and his band of passive resisters took on the might of the British Raj. The pages of *Indian Opinion* were filled with accounts of Gandhi's exploits and the progress of the campaign was eagerly followed in Natal, which had the highest Indian population in the Union.<sup>164</sup> The re-integration of former South African Indians, who had returned to live in India, into that society also occupied much attention,<sup>165</sup> in view of the then increasing trend for Indians,

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163. Indian voters had actually been disenfranchised at the municipal level when the Hertzog government had advised the Governor-General-in-Council to assent to a Natal Provincial Ordinance to this effect in 1924. It could be that Indian voters had lost some interest in this sphere of politics. See Calpin, *Indians in South Africa*, p. 57.

164. See as examples *Indian Opinion*, 18 April 1930; 9 May 1930, 25 May 1930; 30 May 1930; 9 January 1931; 13 February 1931.

165. In fact Mesthrie has shown how this issue did affect local politics, for the failure of the re-integration process in India did encourage opposition to further attempts to "encourage"

especially from Natal, to emigrate.<sup>166</sup> The events taking place in India, whether Gandhi's campaign, or the fortunes of former Natal Indians, thus helped to distract attention away from local issues to some extent.

Freund took another point of view by suggesting that the explanation for the lack of significant political militancy might lie within the nature of the community at this time:

...the features of Indian life... reinforced conservatism and created an inward-looking ethnic community within which the four-pronged identification of race, language, religion and family, served to define one's place in the world.<sup>167</sup>

Freund suggested that Indian militancy only really resurfaced in the late 1930s and 1940s. Another significant factor may be found in the fact that the 1930s saw a concerted anti-Asiatic campaign throughout the province. Reference has already been made to this in earlier chapters, but it is worth observing that the sentiment was not restricted to the urban areas. Everywhere "Asiatic penetration" was an issue. Farmers' Associations, private individuals and even the central government were caught up in a campaign to contain and restrict Indians.<sup>168</sup> In Durban, Freund asserted:

Survival meant a deference in daily behaviour to whites — who controlled the streets in the centre of town.<sup>169</sup>

It is no mere coincidence that anti-Asiatic legislation should have been proposed at this time. Both the Asiatic Land Tenure Bill and the amendments to the Immigration Act proposed by Dr Malan had dire implications for Indians in the province at this time.<sup>170</sup> Petitions were constantly in circulation calling for further

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Indians to return to India or to migrate elsewhere. See Mesthrie, "Cape Town Agreement", pp. 8ff.

166. See *Indian Opinion*, 20 November 1931.

167. Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, p. 38.

168. Calpin, *Indians in South Africa*, pp. 83 - 87.

169. Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, p. 39.

170. See Edley, "Population", p. 136.



restrictions upon Indian traders and farmers.<sup>171</sup> In the face of all this hostility, it is not surprising that Indian politicians should have adopted a low profile, avoiding both open confrontation with the state and further antagonisation of white public opinion. It was only when the depression was well advanced, and the prevailing anti-Asiatic sentiment had resulted in the large-scale retrenchment of Indians throughout the province,<sup>172</sup> that Indians were moved to become more politically active in their campaign for fairer treatment from employers and the state. By this time it was generally recognised that all communities were suffering, so by adding their voice to the chorus of misery, Indians were not singling themselves out for special treatment. Alternatively, it may have been that the pressure from the retrenched among the politicians' constituencies was so great that some overt action had to be taken.

When that action did take place, it was not in the form of antagonistic declarations, but rather in the form of requests for an end to measures which prevented Indian employment,<sup>173</sup> or restricted Indian trade.<sup>174</sup> Special attention was devoted to lobbying for the creation of relief works for Indians<sup>175</sup> which, as has been shown, were granted, despite the prevailing anti-Asiatic climate.<sup>176</sup> The relief works were actually only instituted after the personal intervention of the Indian Agent-General, Sir Kurma Reddi. His intervention may be seen to have lent an apolitical, diplomatic flavour to the request which may have made it more palatable to the authorities. In fact, if the newspapers are closely analysed, anti-Asiatic sentiment, at least superficially, appears to have actually declined in the latter part of the depression period; it was forced out of the newspapers and off the political platforms of the ruling white elite by the formation of the coalition and later fusion governments.

Three further possible explanations for Indian political apathy show some degree of commonality with the experiences of Africans at this time. The first of these

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171. *Natal Mercury*, 16 January 1932.

172. See Minnaar's comments above.

173. See *Indian Opinion*, 25 September 1931.

174. *Indian Opinion*, 7 February 1930.

175. *Indian Opinion*, 25 September 1931.

involves the leisure-time activities of Indians. During the 1930s, a great deal of time and energy was devoted by the more monied class to the viewing and discussion of films. This was so especially in Durban, where there were up to twelve cinemas solely for the use of Indians. Soccer and boxing, especially the latter, were passionately followed and matches attracted large crowds.<sup>177</sup> Unlike the mechanisms of control through social activities for Africans, which were largely imposed and maintained by the local state, Indians appeared to have controlled these activities themselves. However, it may be argued that Indians also dissipated their "surplus energy" in this type of activity and that the eventual effect might have been the same.

The second factor lies in an analysis of the economic situation of Indians in Natal at this time. In many ways, Indians were no better off than Africans. Freund argued that:

Contemporary images of Indians as an intermediary stratum between white and African are inappropriate for the period before World War II; most Indians were considered unskilled and had no real purchase on wages any better than the Africans enjoyed.<sup>178</sup>

Wages were low and, furthermore, unemployment was rife and almost endemic. Poverty and poor diets resulting in malnutrition, disease and high infant mortality, were characteristic of this period.<sup>179</sup> Ginwala's findings indicate that as late as 1943/44, approximately 70,6 per cent of Indians lived below the established Poverty Datum Line.<sup>180</sup> This is indeed a startling revelation, given the fact that the economic climate of the Union had shown considerable improvement in the years succeeding the depression. Unfortunately, no accurate data exists to determine whether the economic position of Indians had shown any improvement in that same period, but it may be suggested that had such an investigation been undertaken in

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176. See Chapter Eight.

177. Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, p. 39.

178. *Ibid.*, pp. 40 - 42.

179. *Ibid.*, p. 40

180. F Ginwala, "Class, Consciousness and Control - Indian South Africans, 1860-1946", D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1974, p. 303.

the depths of the depression, the position would probably have been found to have been even worse.

Finally, the fragmentation observed in African politics also manifested itself in Indian politics at this time. Reference has been made in the course of the thesis to the existence of bodies other than the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), but it is worth noting that even the NIC itself was riven with factions and that a split occurred in the movement in 1932, weakening the response of the Indian community to anti-Asiatic agitation and contributing to the diminution of political activity.<sup>181</sup> Generally speaking therefore, Indian political activity during the depression was notable more for its absence than for its presence.<sup>182</sup>

As with Africans in the same period, it may be suggested that considerable energy had to be devoted to the daily struggle for survival in the face of harsh economic reality and that, as a result, Indian political activity veered more towards co-operation than confrontation. So many constraints operated on Indian economic advancement at this time (and so many more were in the process of formulation) that it would have ill-served the community to engage in any confrontation. Political activity was therefore rather restrained and constricted.

The evidence presented does shed some light on the changing political climate amongst blacks in Natal during the depression years. Faced with economic hardship on a scale never before experienced, Africans (and for that matter, Indians) had to find ways and means of surviving or face starvation and death. Unlike their white counterparts, they could not depend upon the state for assistance, especially in the urban areas. Equally, it was to the urban areas that Africans were forced, by rural poverty and drought, to come. As much as the state tried to stem or reverse the tide, there is clear enough evidence to suggest that, despite official declarations and oft-quoted inaccurate statistical data,<sup>183</sup> the depression actually accelerated the flow of

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181. See D Bagwandeem, "Historical Perspectives" in A J Arkin, K P Magyar and G J Pillay (eds), *The Indian South Africans*, Owen Burgess, Pinetown, 1989, p. 11.

182. This is to be found even in the research undertaken specifically on the effects of the depression on this community. Singh's study in 1990 carefully avoided the political aspects. See Singh, "Effects of the Great Depression".

183. See Chapter Seven.

Africans to the urban areas, especially after 1930 when the depression and the devastating drought began to bite.

Survival in the urban areas in these times of economic crisis came to depend on the generosity of the ruling white employer elite who, because of the adverse circumstances, had acquired more power over the African workforce. This power can be seen both in the reduction of wages and in the deterioration of working conditions described above. Similarly, the tales of exploitation emanating from the white farms in the countryside also bear eloquent witness to the increased power of the white farming community to determine the conditions of labour of their workers. The large numbers of unemployed fruitlessly seeking employment, and the generally desperate conditions, did give the majority of employers great power over their African employees. In the absence of any meaningful support measures should Africans in employment challenge the power of the employer, most Africans were forced to kowtow and obey the demands of the employers for a docile and reliable workforce. If this increased power of coercion was not adequate, the state, on both the central and local levels, acted in concert with their white constituency to force the dissipation of worker militancy. Only during the apartheid era, did the power of the state grow at a comparatively alarming rate. The fears of a general uprising of Africans, in the wake of the Beer Hall riots, and the perceived potential for rapid growth of the militancy of Africans everywhere because of the deteriorating economic conditions, prompted the state to arm itself with a formidable array of legislative weapons with which to "deal" with such an "uprising". In the event, as has been shown, the "uprising" never materialised and the mood of militancy was swirled away on the winds of economic deprivation.

Even the leaders of the various political movements found themselves caught up in a daily struggle for survival. Although nothing definitive can be stated in this connection, there is enough evidence to suggest that several African leaders, including Solomon kaDinuzulu, John Dube and A W G Champion, were desperately short of ready cash during the depression years. Whether they were so short of money that they may have been forced to adopt survival strategies that compromised their previous political positions, or which dictated their political behaviour to some extent, must remain an area for further exploration. Whatever

the case, this chapter has shown that any explanation of the political life of black South Africans during the depression years, including such previously unexplained phenomena as the dissipation of militancy, can only be arrived at through a thorough contextualisation of political activity in the socio-economic background of the times.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis has been to define and analyse the significant impact which the phenomenon known as the Great Depression had on the economic, social and political life of the then province of Natal in the years 1929-1933. This impact was accentuated by the devastating drought which struck the region in the later years of the depression. Natal's geographical position, the nature of the economic activities of the province and the diverse composition of its population, all played a part in determining the severity of the crisis. During the depression and drought Natal society underwent a number of significant changes. Urbanisation took place on a rapid and massive scale, changing the demographic composition and distribution of the population. Commerce, industry and agriculture of all forms were also affected; hardly a commercial undertaking of any sort remained immune and the thousands who laboured in these enterprises often bore the brunt as capital sought to minimise losses. Even those outside the ambit of commercial capital, in the reserves and on the fringes of urban society, felt the effects to some degree. Political activity reflected these tempestuous times and the heavy burden that the economic situation imposed. The years 1929-1933 live on in the collective consciousness as a memory of hardship, insecurity and desperation — justification enough for a thorough investigation of the nature of the phenomenon.

Closer examination of the findings shows that state policy and the inherent racism among whites in the province served to pass the major burden of the depression onto those who could least afford to shoulder it, the African majority. Harried from pillar to post in the pursuance of a segregationist ideal, Africans undoubtedly bore the brunt of retrenchments in commerce and industry in the urban areas. In the rural areas too, it was Africans who suffered ejection from white farms and a drastic decline in standards of living. Expected to return to their "country seats" in the reserves where their plight could be conveniently ignored by all but a few dedicated bureaucrats, Africans experienced considerable hardship due to unemployment and drought. It is no mere coincidence that segregationist legislation such as the Native Service Contract Act was passed during the depression years. Of all the citizens of

Natal, Africans experienced the worst consequences of the "years of red dust".

In the urban areas, the "civilised labour" policy and tariff and wage legislation conspired with white public opinion to boost white employment at the expense of other groups, especially Africans and Indians. The selective use of tariff protection, and a host of other measures employed by the state, actively encouraged the employment of whites and relentlessly discouraged the employment of blacks, especially Africans, in many areas of economic activity, often flying in the face of sound capitalist business principles. Wages fell and levels of exploitation rose as employers tried desperately to keep their enterprises afloat. This situation was to continue until the economy had fully recovered.

As many of these enterprises, especially those in the major industrial and commercial centre of the province, Durban, were related in some way or another to the shipping industry, the decline of both coastal and export trade hit local businesses hard. Durban continued to be the premier port of the Union, handling nearly 80 per cent of all seaborne cargo. However, the decline in world trade, and the high rates for services which had to be paid by freight companies because of the government's adherence to the gold standard, meant that fewer vessels called at the port and of those, even fewer made full use of port facilities. The trend towards the replacement of coal-fired steamers by oil-burning vessels also meant that demand for Natal's coal fell. Moreover, the shorter stay in port of oil-burning vessels and their greater cargo capacity meant that shipping repairs, chandling and other related activities also declined during the depression years, all of which had a negative impact on the regional economy. Once the government left the gold standard and the recovery began, the situation improved rapidly due to the increase in trade.

In the coal-mines of Natal, for a variety of reasons, not least of which were the Hertzog government's stubborn adherence to the gold standard and the fact that Natal's coal-mines were largely dependent on a highly competitive export market, hard times were experienced as export markets dried up and unsaleable surpluses mounted. The closure of mines and the introduction of short time meant hardship for miners, especially the thousands of Africans who laboured both above and below ground. The depression served to highlight the abuse of illiterate miners by unscrupulous mine stores through the hated token system, and brought the often

appalling living conditions of black miners under the scrutiny of the authorities. Interestingly, despite the general thrust of state policy, mine managers argued for the retention of skilled African labourers on the mines, and strove to keep such workers, even during the worst of the depression years. The formation of various associations to regulate aspects of the coal trade is significant, for these associations continued their work long after the depression had passed and it may be claimed that hard times had forced the introduction of monopolistic practices. It is interesting to note that while the Natal coal-mining industry did recover from the worst effects of the depression, the sales of bunker coal, which formed a significant proportion of the trade, only briefly regained their pre-depression levels during the global conflict of 1939-1945, when a number of antiquated coal-steamers were recommissioned. After the conflict passed, the bunker trade resumed its downward spiral, forcing the acquisition of other market outlets.

White commercial agriculture in Natal was among the worst affected sectors of the economy; the depression greatly exacerbated the already unhealthy state of most commercial farming in the province. The fact that the depression and drought followed a period of considerable difficulties, which had lasted throughout the later 1920s, made it almost impossible for many farmers to continue. During the depression, many farmers, especially those who were under-capitalised, found themselves staring bankruptcy in the face. Falling demand and a consequent drastic decline in returns for many agricultural exports meant that farmers were also victims of the world-wide depression. A significant decline in income was experienced by most farmers, including those who served only the local market. This meant that in order to survive, strategies had to be developed to increase income and raise profitability. Ironically, many of the strategies employed, such as the planting of additional lands to cash crops, or of increasing the yields per hectare, or per animal, actually contributed to the further decline of the fortunes of the entire farming community. Their net effect was to flood even local markets with surplus products, thus further minimalising the returns farmers received and aggravating their already precarious position.

One of the extremely negative consequences of the pressure on commercial farmers was the impact their cost-saving strategies had on their workforces. These strategies often led to the ejection of tenants; to a drastic decline in the conditions of



employment of tenants who were fortunate enough not to be ejected; and to a general decline in already low agricultural wage levels. Fortunately for some farmers, there was ample state assistance in the form of low-interest loans from the Land Bank, tariff protection and a host of other measures all designed to keep farmers on their farms both during and after the crisis. The depression was directly responsible for government efforts to bolster the agricultural sector of the economy in the later 1930s and measures to guarantee farmers a decent return for their produce were introduced. The Marketing Act of 1937, which instituted control boards to regulate prices and, to some extent, production, of almost all agricultural produce can be directly traced to the traumas suffered by farmers in the depression years.

The state expended more time, energy and taxpayers' money on providing assistance to white farmers than on any other sector of the economy during the depression. Even when principle conflicted with practicality (as in the case of the decision to adhere to the gold standard), the state tried to make some amends to farmers by subsidising their exports through a levy on imports. This strategy failed due to the fact that the losses incurred as a result of adherence to the gold standard could not be adequately covered by dwindling state resources, especially at a time when demands for the funding of other deserving causes were increasing. Nevertheless there was no lack of effort on the part of the government to assist farmers. While the depression lifted in other sectors of the economy during 1932, the crisis in agriculture persisted, necessitating continued assistance. It may be argued that the depression was partly responsible for the increasing dependence of South African farmers on government assistance, a trend which continued apace in the decades following "the years of red dust".

In some cases, farmers were so grateful for the assistance they received that they became open supporters of the ruling political party, while others, angry and frustrated that government policy was actually defiantly pursuing policies known to be to their detriment, sought relief through protest and involvement in opposition politics. Unsurprisingly, those sectors which received greater state assistance were found to be less vocal and more forbearing of government policy than those who did not.

Some sugar farmers took advantage of the plight of their fellows; considerable growth was evident in the size of lands owned by millers-cum-planters as they bought or foreclosed on land which had served as security for loans to smaller cane farmers. The difficulties of cane growers during the depression years because of the necessity to export surpluses were also undoubtedly responsible for the introduction of the quota system in 1936. This had the effect of limiting the amount of cane that individuals could grow and definitely placed a check on the growth of millers-cum-planters. Once again, hard times had resulted in greater regulation to bring about stability and ensure profitability. Constant anti-Asiatic agitation was evident in the rural areas where Indian farmers found themselves victims of prejudice. Schemes to introduce cane growing among Africans also suffered the disapprobation of white planters who wished to see Africans as labourers, not competitors. These schemes were frustrated and the level of exploitation intensified as the surplus of labour grew; wages were cut significantly because of the greater availability of labour. Nor were sugar farmers, for example, prepared to allow any alteration in working conditions which might have disadvantaged them at a time when they were in financial need. The influence of sugar farmers at national level was somewhat diluted by the formation of the fusion government, but they were still able to maintain a significant degree of influence in Natal after the depression had passed. Such influence was largely responsible for keeping the sugar industry largely in the hands of white farmers.

If conditions in white commercial agriculture were bad, then the conditions in the reserves of Natal and Zululand can only be described as desperate. The long-treasured myth that the reserves were large enough to accommodate all Africans in the province and functional enough to provide a secure financial base for the families of absent migrant workers, was finally exploded during the depression years. It has been shown that Africans harried from white farms, and from the urban areas when they were retrenched, could hardly find enough land in the reserves to farm adequately; furthermore, even without the absent migrant population of the period, the reserves could not support their resident population. Poor farming methods, exhausted soil and overgrazing meant that some areas were already verging on semi-desert even prior to the depression. When the depression resulted in an initial influx of unemployed from the urban areas and from white farms, and the devastating drought began to make its effects felt, more and more

areas of the reserves of the province became unable to sustain their inhabitants. Crops failed in many areas and thousands of cattle and other livestock died, greatly impoverishing Africans. Conditions were so bad in certain districts, especially in the reserves of Zululand, that the state had to distribute maize or see tens of thousands of impoverished Africans slowly starve to death.

In their dire poverty, Africans were exploited by unscrupulous storekeepers and even the meagre relief efforts of the Native Affairs Department were heavily criticised as they were reportedly creating a dependence on state handouts. Farmers especially, expected Africans to work; if the depression and drought had increased the number of available workseekers, then wages had to fall and Africans were simply expected to accept what little the farmers were prepared to offer. When they did not and it became apparent that more and more Africans were deserting white farms, the state responded with draconian legislation to sustain the labour tenancy system. The decline in wages and the greater availability and exploitability of labour were seen to be the only positive consequences of an otherwise bleak experience for white farmers.

The most significant result of an examination of the reserve economy of Natal and Zululand is the finding that the reserves could no longer sustain their normal population and that in order to survive, more and more Africans were migrating to the urban areas of Natal, where they eked out a precarious living, often in defiance of the law and of moves to repatriate them. It is not without significance that Africans in the urban areas held onto their jobs for longer than normal periods during the depression years, nor that there was a marked increase in older men seeking work in the urban areas, nor that domestic service became increasingly popular. All these factors may be taken as an indication that conditions in the rural areas were deteriorating. Whether the depression brought about other survival strategies such as the planting of vegetables or increased squatting on Crown or mission reserve lands remains an area for future investigation. There can be no doubt, however, that the depression and drought had served to highlight the desperate conditions of the people who inhabited the reserves.

The government implicitly acknowledged that conditions in the reserves were appalling by adding a considerable amount of land to the reserves through the

Hertzog bills which were finally passed in 1936. To argue that this additional land was merely a pay-off for the loss of the Cape African franchise is to ignore the realities of the reserve economy throughout the country and especially in Natal and Zululand. Although an appreciable amount of land was added to reserves in the province, much of this land remained to be alienated from white owners and the situation did not improve to any significant extent. The reserves of Natal and Zululand remained rural backwaters where poverty and ignorance reigned supreme.

The whole question of unemployment and the distress consequent upon it has proved difficult to quantify. The lack of accessibility of official records, and the restricted nature of such records, makes the task almost impossible. It is possible to state with certainty, though, that Africans were worst affected by unemployment, especially in the urban areas. No serious attempt was made to quantify the number of unemployed of any race or gender other than white males, who were considered to be the most important breadwinners. State assistance was also largely limited to that category of unemployed, despite some attempts later in the depression to assist white juveniles, "coloureds" and Indians. State policy in general was largely directed at assisting the "poor whites", who were mostly rural Afrikaner supporters of the government. As comparatively few such persons inhabited the province of Natal (except for those in the northern Natal region), little direct assistance of this type was given in Natal.

In the urban areas, research has shown that the central state expected the major portion of the costs involved in providing relief works to be borne by local municipalities and thus dispensed smaller amounts to relieve distress and unemployment through the Department of Labour than it had done in times of relative prosperity. The major municipalities of the region came to resent this imposition, and the undue burden it placed on the ratepayers, and refused assistance to those who could not demonstrate that they were residents of some years standing. This meant that the many hundreds of poor people who had flocked to the urban areas in search of assistance were often denied such assistance and had to find other ways of surviving. Charities were likewise under extreme pressure to stretch scarce resources over a vastly increased number of applicants for relief. The lack of co-ordination among charitable organisations was brought home forcefully during the depression, and it is significant that the Community Chest concept of pooling

collected resources for distribution among an approved list of charitable organisations should have found favour in the major urban centre of the province at this time.

It has been found that for all their shortcomings, the relief efforts of municipalities in the urban areas were fairly effective in preventing starvation and did go some way towards relieving the misery and distress of the white population. It can also be categorically stated that the introduction of unemployment insurance for whites which took place in 1937, was a direct result of the hardship that was experienced by whites due to mass unemployment during the depression. This scheme sought to prevent a recurrence of the phenomenon during any future financial crisis - at least some sort of support would exist to tide families over such a disaster. As far as other population groups were concerned, however, relief measures during the depression were a dismal failure. Most municipalities were also constrained by the consciousness that over-lavish provision of relief might serve to attract more unemployed from other regions and make Natal's major urban centres "meccas" of the unemployed. At most, then, the bare minimum was done for some and nothing meaningful at all for Africans, a state of affairs which persisted well into the 1970s.

In the rural areas, the provincial administration established roadworks aimed at absorbing unemployed whites before they became disheartened and left for the urban areas. The number of such persons in Natal was insignificant when compared to other regions, and places were given to young white males from urban areas who found themselves without employment. There was also an element of gerrymandering in the provision of relief in rural areas, for unemployed Afrikaners were brought into Natal to work on many of the schemes, and they remained which was to have important consequences in the period after 1948, when the Nationalist Party significantly increased its support in the province. In the reserves, apart from their efforts to provide basic sustenance to thousands of starving Africans, the state, in the person of the Chief Native Commissioner, did try to give priority to Natal Africans in certain forms of employment. These efforts were, however, frustrated by vested white interests, and as has been mentioned, even the programme to feed starving Africans was heavily criticised. Relief works on a small scale were established in some of the reserves but, unfortunately, little evidence of the exact nature of these works can be found, an indication, perhaps, of their insignificance.

Always sensitive to the demands of white voters on labour issues and alarmed at the level of distress among the white community, the government curtailed spending on relief for Africans in 1932 and left them to survive almost entirely on their own meagre resources, during what were to be some of the worst years of depression and drought this century.

Africans had little option but to incur debts, or to journey to the urban areas in search of employment and assistance. Despite statistical evidence provided by the urban local authorities suggesting that the number of Africans in the areas under their control was diminishing, other evidence indicates that there was a deliberate avoidance of established procedures of registration in the urban areas, and that the number of Africans in the urban areas of the province was actually growing during the depression years. It has been suggested that this discrepancy may be explained by the need for local authorities to placate concerned citizens and even the central government, for whom the large number of "surplus" Africans in the urban areas was a signal that trouble was not far off.

Against this background of socio-economic change and upheaval, the political activities of the time were played out. It has been shown that in the arena of white politics, nearly all existing political movements (and those that briefly flourished during the crisis) were touched by the depression. All movements had to address problems of economic policy, unemployment and relief, for these were seen to be the real issues of the day. New political movements arose out of frustration with the existing political parties and their constant petty bickering. The failure of the Hertzog government to react more positively to the needs of the English-speaking population of Natal, and the seeming inability or unwillingness of the South African Party to press more vigorously for the realisation of these aspirations, resulted in the formation of separatist movements to achieve such aims.

Although Natal "jingoism" was indeed an element of some of these movements, as it continued to be long after the depression, the economic realities of the day provided the leaders of such movements with sufficient ammunition to attract large crowds to meetings. The Natal English-speaking polity experienced a heightened sense of isolation from the centre of political power in the Union; they had little in common with their "masters" in Pretoria, especially when it came to economic policy or to

state assistance to the unemployed. These differences had always existed but were greatly exacerbated during the depression. The chasm between English-speaking Natal and Afrikaners, although apparently temporarily bridged during the fusion years following the depression, was to widen again in the period after 1939. The activities of the jingoes during the 1950s which came to a head in the republican crisis of 1960/61, is proof positive of this.

The frustration of Natalians also led to the formation of "extremist" movements which saw salvation as lying in the drastic restructuring of society along either fascist or socialist lines. Natal was not unique in this respect; both in the rest of the Union and in many countries elsewhere in the capitalist world, such movements flourished during this time of economic upheaval.

Despite considerable popular support, however, these movements were not able to convert such support into votes; the extremists were, with a few notable exceptions, spurned by the electorate. The rapid improvement of the economy after 1933 and the internecine rivalry endemic in many of these movements led to their demise; a development undoubtedly hastened by the decision of the government to leave the gold standard and by the "toenadering" between the main political parties on a national level. These latter factors changed the mood of white politics throughout South Africa and the atmosphere of doom and gloom which had fostered the formation of these alternative movements began to dissipate.

Black politics was also severely affected by the depression. The mood of confrontation and militancy evident in the early years of the depression gradually gave way to co-operation and accommodationist political behaviour. The state played a role in this. In the wake of the Beer Hall riots, the government was given sweeping powers which it was not reticent about using, removing some key black politicians from the scene through banning orders. Other measures of social control were also instituted, but it has also been shown in this connection that the essentially bourgeois nature of most of the black elite determined that the protection and furtherance of their own interests came to enjoy more prominence than the aspirations of the oppressed labouring class. Exactly how effective state measures were has been questioned and an alternative perspective has been suggested to explain the decline of militancy throughout the province.

The mood of militancy, it has been suggested, came to be buried under the weight of the great economic crisis. Evidence has been presented to suggest that even the leaders of black political movements were experiencing financial difficulties during the depression. The lack of funds resulting from the unemployment of members and the general shortage of money meant that even previously flourishing movements such as the ICU and ANC were in great financial difficulties. Other leaders were forced into touting their books or extending their caps to white capital to acquire funds. The depression and the high levels of unemployment gave employers greater control over their workforce. Employers were able to cut wages, to make greater use of piecework and to either lengthen or shorten the working hours of employees with relative impunity. Employers were less open to pressure from employees and the greater supply of labour meant that employers were able to exercise greater control over the political activism of their employees. These factors, acting in concert, brought about the "lull" in black militancy that was to last for much of the rest of the decade.

Viewed in totality, the Great Depression had a profound and significant effect on the lives of Natalians who lived through it. It is not for nothing that "the years of red dust" live on in the collective consciousness of the region.



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1/LWB	Louwsburg
1/NEW	Newcastle
1/NKA	Nkandhla
1/NGA	Nongoma
1/PPB	Paulpietersburg
1/UBO	Ubombo
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